Sanctification in the New Testament

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"Strive... for holiness, without which no one will see the Lord."

This sentence from the 12th chapter of the letter to the Hebrews was the primary scripture for John Wesley in his whole Christian life. In one of his later sermons (On the Wedding Garment, 1790), he expressly denied that he ever changed his mind on this subject. "Some have supposed that when I began to declare, 'By grace ye are saved through faith,' I retracted what I had before maintained, 'Without holiness no man shall see the Lord.' But it is an entire mistake; these Scriptures well consist with each other; the meaning of the former being plainly this, 'By faith we are saved from sin, made holy.'"

Whether Hebrews 12:14 played a similar role in the thinking of the founders and main theologians of the monastic movement I do not know. But the matter itself, to see the Lord as the goal of a holy life through meditation and asceticism, was certainly in the center of this movement. I doubt, however, whether any of the monastic fathers would have said that human beings are sanctified by faith.

But obviously holiness and sanctification are not major themes of New Testament teaching, at least if you look only at the use of the words. In order to clarify what may be a New Testament basis of a doctrine of sanctification today—be it in the Benedictine or be it in the Wesleyan tradition—I will try to answer

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three questions:
1. What is the meaning of holiness and sanctification in the world of religion and in the Hebrew Bible?
2. What is the meaning and the importance of sanctification in the teaching of the New Testament?
3. What is the legacy of the New Testament teaching on sanctification for our time?

1. HOLINESS AND SANCTIFICATION IN THE WORLD OF RELIGION

Holiness is one of the basic phenomena in the world of religion. According to Söderblom, the dimension of holiness is more fundamental to religious thinking than the idea of God. There are some clear aspects of this dimension which are found in many religions as well as in the Hebrew Bible.

a) The meaning of “holy” and “holiness” is not to be defined by other words or ideas. Holy is God and whatever and whoever belongs to him in a special way. The opposite to the holy is the profane, the area of everyday life, accessible to everybody. The holy is set apart from everyday life. It is a sign and space for the dimension of the transcendent within this world and bears in itself the mark of the fascinosum and miraculous.

To say that God is holy describes him as the “Wholly Other” and indicates the numinous power of his being, in the presence of which human beings must perish if they are not cleansed (Is. 6). In the Bible God’s holiness is also said to be the reason for his faithfulness and righteousness (cf. Psalm 99) and his love which exceeds all human measure (Hosea 11:9).

On the level of persons and things the opposite notions of clean and unclean have some relationship to the holy and the profane. What is holy has to be clean; but not all that is clean is thought to be holy. The “holy” is not only without any defilement; it is full of power, mystery, and super human potency. Therefore of course holy persons and holy offerings should be blameless and flawless; but basically their holiness is not the result of any characteristic or attribute. They are holy because God set them aside for himself or because human beings dedicated them to God.

b) It is of great importance that all that is holy is concrete. Thoughts or ideas are not called holy, only persons, places, or things. These persons, places, or things are the marks of the transcendent, the “Wholly Other” within this world. They are this in such a way that a piece of the real world is cut out and set apart as a sign of the presence of the Holy One within this world. At least in the Bible those holy places or persons symbolize that the whole world belongs to God. The election of Israel as “Kingdom of priests and a holy nation” is based on the argument: “for all the earth is mine” (Exod. 19:5f.).

c) Sanctification in its broadest sense means: to make holy or to declare as holy. Depending on the subject and the object of such a sanctifying action we may distinguish different notions of the word, which I will illustrate with biblical examples.

- God indicates his holiness (or the holiness of his great name) which has been profaned among the nations; he proves himself to be holy (cf. Ezek. 36:20ff).
- God separates priests or his people of Israel from the peoples in the world and
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Sanctifies them to be his own possession (cf. Lev. 20:26, 21:15, 23, 22:32). Lev. 22:32 shows that God's saving act, the liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt, is considered the "sanctification" of Israel. The cultic dimension and the salvation history aspect are brought together in a manner which may be quite unusual in the world of religious thinking but which is very deep and effective in its theological message:

- People dedicate themselves or things to God. This notion belongs almost completely to the cultic aspect of holiness.
- People try to live in accord with God and his holiness. It is this aspect of sanctification which shows within the biblical tradition the strongest ethical emphasis of the concept of holiness. The strange mixture of ritual, moral, and social commandments, which is so characteristic of the Holiness Code (esp. Lev. 19), may also be found in a similar context in other religions. The commandment "You shall be holy; for I am holy, Yahweh your God" (Lev. 19:2) is "applied to every facet of Israel's existence, but—and this may be unique in the world of religions—wherever men are involved with each other holiness means love—love to neighbour, to the resident alien, the blind, the deaf, and the slave."

Last observation: It is quite remarkable that in early Judaism, just at the birth of Christianity, there were two quite influential 'Holiness movements': the Pharisees and the Essenes. As far as we know both tried to take seriously that according to Exod. 19:6 Israel should be "a Kingdom of priests and a holy nation." They applied in different ways the prescriptions of priestly purity to all people of Israel and to the members of their own group respectively. The group at Qumran, especially thought of their community as the temple of God and tried to shape the lives of individuals and of the community in the presence of God.

2. THE MEANING OF SANCTIFICATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

There are two possible ways to deal with the theme of sanctification in the New Testament.

1. We could look for all motives and ideas within the teaching of the New Testament which in the Christian tradition have been connected with the subject of Christian holiness and sanctification.

2. We could confine ourselves to the use of the Greek words hagiasmos and hagiazin.

I tend more to the second alternative, but I do not want to limit my task to a mere lexicographical research of these Greek words. I am interested in studying the linguistic paradigm of the language of holiness, but I will also try to note where the matter of sanctification is dealt with by using other words or images. This includes the necessity to distinguish carefully the different ways of speaking on this matter.

a) If we look at the teaching of Jesus, as it is transmitted in the Synoptic Tradition, we will observe that the language of holiness is rarely used. In the first petition of the Lord's prayer "Hallowed be thy name" it is not clear who is asked to make God's name holy—God himself, which would fit the second petition "Thy Kingdom come," or human beings, which would relate to the third, "Thy will be done." Perhaps the ambiguity is intended. God is asked to vindicate the holiness of his name by making
human beings ready and able to honor his name and to respect with their whole lives God’s holiness and divinity. 11

The “Cleansing of the Temple” could indicate the zeal of Jesus for the holiness of the Temple; but, contrary to the usual Jewish concept of the holiness of the sanctuary, the Temple is said to be a “house of prayer for all the nations” (Mark 11:17).

There are even some exegetes who are convinced that by words like Mark 7:15 “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile...” Jesus dissolves the distinction between the sacred and the profane which is basic for the religious thought of the whole ancient world. 12 When he denies that there are things which are per se clean and unclean it seems that he does not share the idea of an almost “material” holiness of certain things.

In every case we may say that Jesus did not use the cultic paradigm to describe the impact of God’s presence within the world of human beings. With the image of “the Kingdom of God which draws near” he uses the language of power and liberation. With his view of discipleship he enters the world of learning—but in a very special way which calls for the whole being of the disciple.

b) In the Johannine form of the teaching of Jesus there are only three, but three important occurrences of hagiazoun: “the Father has sanctified the Son and sent him into the world” (John 10:36). He is God’s chosen and consecrated messenger, endowed with the Holy Spirit. John 17:17 and 19 show what is meant by sanctification in the whole New Testament: In the prayer, “sanctify them thy disciples in truth,” God is asked to include them within his sphere and to permeate them with his nature and reality, his “truth.” Here, too, sanctification is connected with the sending into the world. Sanctification, being set apart for God and his truth, is a contrast to the world, but does not mean withdrawal from the world. On the contrary, it is the basis for the sending into the world as witness to God’s love and truth. And in the same manner as with Jesus it is God who sanctifies those whom Jesus will send. In order that the disciples, as sinful human beings, may be sanctified by the Father, the Son has to intercede for them. He sanctifies himself, i.e., consecrates his life as a sacrifice for his disciples in order that they may be holy, belonging fully to God. 13

The sanctification of human beings is God’s work through Jesus Christ. He makes out of sinful creatures messengers of his grace and truth within a world which is opposed to him. If we were to ask what is the “equivalent” of God’s action on the side of the disciples and within their life, the fourth Gospel would answer with reminders like: “abide in me” or “keep my word/my commandments” and would add: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you,” thus indicating the ethical dimension of the human reaction to God’s action.

c) The center of the New Testament teaching of sanctification is found within the letters of Paul. Paul obviously offers not only his own theological reflections but represents an important aspect of the message of the early Jewish-Hellenistic Christian Church as a whole which shows its traces in Acts 1, Peter and the letter to the Hebrews.

The first important common feature is: Sanctification of human beings is in principle God’s action through Jesus Christ. In the first letter to the Corinthians Paul criti-
cizes many problems in the life of the Corinthian Church, but nevertheless he writes "to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1:2). It is "Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1:30). And the members of the church are reminded: "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ..." (6:11).

This corresponds with the use of the participle perfect passive of ἡγιάζειν to describe the Christians in Acts 20:32 (26:18); Rom. 15:16; 2. Tim. 2:21; Heb. 10:10 (Part. Pass. Praes. Heb. 2:10, 10:14); cf. 1 Cor. 1:2; John 17:19.

When Paul addresses the members of the church as "saints" he uses not just a title of honor for the eschatological people of God whose original meaning is already forgotten. The church and its members belong to God, are "his saints" because Christ has sanctified them by the sacrifice of his life. Holiness is in its essence social holiness: there are no single saints and in the view of the New Testament it is not possible to distinguish between the holiness of the church as institution and the holiness of her members. Even where it is said that Christ has sanctified the Church or the people (Eph. 5:26; Heb. 13:12) it is obvious that each individual member is included, and where Paul uses the plural—"saints"—he speaks not only of the sum of individual saints but of the church as a whole as the communion of saints.

As we have noticed there are examples where Paul uses justification and sanctification as parallel expressions of what has been done by God in Jesus Christ and through baptism for the salvation of human beings. Justification and sanctification therefore do not relate to one another as indicative and imperative as is held by a broad tradition of Protestant theological thought. Both notions speak in similar ways of God's initiative for the salvation of humankind and the establishment of a new relationship between God and those who belong to Jesus Christ. The difference is only that the word "justification" belongs to the language of law and social relationship whereas the word "sanctification" belongs to that of cult and worship.

What effect has this different background on the meaning of the theological terms? "Sanctification" describes the "evidence of the reality of justification." "Justification" speaks about a changed relationship with God in which sin is forgiven and a new status before God is granted and a whole community with God is established. "Sanctification" speaks about a changed relationship with God from which a renewed being results; a new attitude and behavior towards God and people in our environment and towards ourselves, a behavior which is shaped by this new relationship. As distinguished from what is said about justification we can observe in the notion of sanctification a kind of inclusion of human action within God's action. There is some sort of synergism between God and human beings which, of course, is not accumulative, adding human efforts to God's work, but which is "inclusive," enabling and motivating the Christians to bring their will, their thinking, their feeling, their gifts and their potentiality, their weaknesses and shortcomings into the relationship with God and to use them as instruments of God's grace.

In this connection the relationship between the work of the Holy Spirit and sanctification is of great importance. Through the work of the Spirit human beings experi-
ence the presence of God in their lives, and as a place of divine presence they are sanctified, filled, and shaped by the power of God’s nature. God’s nature, however, is love, and therefore it is God’s love which has been poured into the hearts, the very center of the lives of those who are justified by faith through the Holy Spirit that has been given to them (Rom. 5:5). The sanctifying action of the Spirit, therefore, is God’s own work, the work of his grace and love, coming from extra nos, and at the same time it is done with us and in us (in nobis) motivating our spirit and enabling our body to be used to the service of God.19

This points to the next feature of the Pauline notion of sanctification. The language of holiness underlines the fact that our whole life belongs to God. It is not only our inner relationship to God which is affected by the salvific work of God in Christ but our whole life, including spirit, soul, and especially body. It is Paul’s prayer that God’s peace may sanctify the Christians in Thessalonica entirely and that their spirits, souls, and bodies may be kept sound and blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23). Because the Christian people have not yet reached the final destination of their lives they are still in the process of sanctification, of preservation and trial, of growing and perfection.

The arena in which this has to be fulfilled and accomplished is the arena of everyday life, including the church and the world outside her. The spiritual worship to which Paul calls the Christians in Rom. 12:1ff. is the process of sanctification “to present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds....” That is the accomplishment of God’s sanctifying grace in our life and it is executed in the organic togetherness within the body of Christ and in a life of abundant love within this world as it is shown by Paul in Rom. 12:3-21.20

This leads, where necessary, to practical advice for Christians on what to do and what not to do. Sanctification in its positive intention means to be filled with the love of God and of our fellow human beings and to live out this love (1 Thess. 4:9).

But sanctification also deals with the negative aspect. There are manners and kinds of behavior which we should abstain from. There is no doubt that not only in the later Christian tradition but also already within the New Testament sexual passion and lust are mentioned as primary dangers to a holy life (1 Thess. 4:3ff.).21 It is not our task in this paper to deal with the question of what problems this has caused for human beings struggling to balance their desires to live a holy life with their sexuality. I should only mention that in the broader context of Christian paraenesis all dimensions of human relationships with one another and also our relationship to property or wealth are mentioned as areas where we have to beware of evil habits and attitudes.22

A last observation: The image of the Holy within the world includes also the separation of those things and persons which are holy from everyday life. As we have seen, this image is used in the New Testament not literally but in a figurative sense. The people who are sanctified by God through Jesus Christ live their lives with their fellow human beings. Nevertheless, they are foreigners in the world because their lives have new roots and a new destination through the grace of God. But it is just this distance from the world which is the basis of their existence for the world as messengers of God’s reconciling love within this world.23
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d! We should not close this survey on the New Testament teaching on sanctification without a short look into the letter to the Hebrews. Here the paradox of the Christian perspective of holiness is carried to extremes.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews takes up the categories of worship and sacrifice of the Old Testament temple, but only to surpass these categories radically. Through his sacrifice and his blood Christ purifies from their sins those who belong to him. Through him they achieve not only an outward purity and transitory holiness but an inward sanctification which is valid once for all (Heb. 9:13ff.; 10:10).

Sanctification means to be received into communion with God. It means to share God's own holiness and therefore to have an unhindered access to the "sanctuary," i.e., to God himself. For the letter to the Hebrews, therefore, sanctification is salvation, and sanctification is perfection. This perfection is not achieved after a lifelong quest for holiness or by the gift of a "second blessing." "By a single offering he [Jesus Christ] has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14). Nevertheless, this perfection is not yet the end of Christian pilgrimage. It is threatened by the danger of apostasy which would mean to lost once for all (Heb. 10:29) and it is the beginning of a dynamic and faithful life in the communion with God which enables us to "worship the living God" (Heb. 9:14). Again we have the language of cult, but from Heb. 12:28 and its context it is clear that such worship includes the service of the whole person in all areas of everyday life.

The admonition "to pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14), therefore, does not encourage the effort to achieve holiness and salvation by works of moral endeavor, but to live the call and the grace which we have received. (Again the combination of "peace with everyone" and "holiness" indicates the deep and indissoluble connection between love of God and one's neighbor in the New Testament tradition!)

The deepest expression of the theology of sanctification within the letter to the Hebrews is found in 13:1-14. The author refers to the bodies of the animals whose blood at the Day of Atonement is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin. These bodies are burned outside the camp. Like them, burdened with the guilt and the curse of sin, Jesus suffered outside the city gate, outside the sanctuary, outside the precincts of the temple, outside the Holy City. But just this place of gallows and garbage, this place of utmost profanity becomes the place for sanctification where, by the blood of Jesus, the people are sanctified and brought into communion with God. The Old Testament meaning of "holiness" is defined radically new in the sense of a simil sanctus simil profanus.

This gives also a new direction to the lives of those who are sanctified. They are called to "go to him outside the camp and ital bear the abuse he endured" (Heb. 13:13). According to this conception Christian "sanctuaries" are no longer conceivable. The "holy places" of Christianity have to be in the midst of the garbage of our inner city, where people suffer from alienation from God and themselves and where we try to take with us the presence of God and the holiness of his love to all the "unholy" places, where hatred and fear reign.
3. THE LEGACY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING FOR TODAY

Within the New Testament terminology of salvation, the language of sanctification and holiness has three specific notions which are important also for our teaching today.

(1) The theocentric meaning of salvation

Salvation is not only a matter of human well-being or of a meaningful life. It is basically a matter of relationship to God. To belong to God is the very essence of salvation. Therefore "no one will see the Lord without holiness" (Heb. 12:14) points not to a "pre-condition" rewarded by a life in God's eternal presence, but it is the matter itself. Holiness means to belong to God and is accomplished in the last encounter with him where we will "see him as he is" (I John 3:2).

Because God's very nature is love, this theocentric meaning of salvation does not exclude our relationship to other people from our life with God. On the contrary, the nearer we draw towards God the nearer we will come to our neighbors.

(2) The concrete meaning of salvation

Salvation does not only include forgiveness or a change within our "heavenly account." It is also a change in our personal relationship to God, and this not only imputative, so that we are seen as people who belong to God, but also effective, so that we are made to be his people, able to do his will, taught and empowered by his Holy Spirit. Our whole life belongs to God. All dimensions of this life are at his disposal to be instruments of his grace and righteousness within this world.

(3) The inclusive meaning of salvation

Although salvation is received by faith alone through the grace of God in Jesus Christ this does not mean that we, as children of God, are merely passive in the process of salvation. God's sanctifying grace makes us instruments of his work within this world, 'working out our own salvation'—not to merit it but to be a living and active part of it and its fruits.

Regarding the relationship of the New Testament teaching on holiness and sanctification to what we have said about holiness within the world of religions and the Hebrew Bible, I want to point to three additional observations.

(1) The noncultic dimension of holiness

In contrast to what is seen in most religions and in the Hebrew Bible, in the New Testament we do not have holy places or sacred vessels, not even special holy persons beyond what is said about the Christians as a communion of saints. What does it mean in this context that some Christian traditions have reestablished special signs of holiness within the Christian church by establishing sacred places or persons?

(2) The social dimension of holiness

The main emphasis on holiness and sanctification in the New Testament is on the social aspect of God's work with us. This was never totally forgotten in Christian tradition, especially not within those movements we represent here. But at the same time it was never easy to relate this social dimension of holiness to the emphasis on person-
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al holiness and perfection which is also very characteristic to our common tradition. To be released from all anxiety about our personal salvation because of being justified and sanctified by Jesus Christ sets us free to take care of others. At the same time we feel still the necessity and the inward obligation to care for our personal relationship with Jesus Christ and to deepen our spiritual life day by day. How can we make both these ends meet?

(3) The cosmic dimension of holiness

Especially in the Hebrew Bible we find that the separation of certain places and times and people as "holy" is a sign of the fact that the whole world belongs to God. All creation is sacred to God. On the one side the New Testament has fulfilled this meaning by declaring all things "clean." We can use all with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:4; Rom. 14:14; Titus 1:15). On the other hand we have lost special signs which remind us that we as human beings may not use and exploit the creation according to our discretion as it belongs to God and we are to administer it according to his will. Do we need anew signs like a holy fallow or the Sabbath Year or similar regulations to remind us that "the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Psalm 24:1) and that it has been entrusted to us for careful stewardship and not for boundless exploitation?²⁹

Notes
6. Cf. the examples given by Mircea Eliade, Das Heilige und das Profane, pp. 147ff.

This of course is the method of articles in theological dictionaries like those of Otto Procksch and Horst Balz (refer to note 2). A middle course, as in this paper, is steered by Otto Riches (refer to note 2) or E.G. Blackman, Art. *Sanctification*, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), col. 210-213.

Ulrich Luz, "Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (Mt. 1-7)," *Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum NT I/1* (Zürich: Benziger Verlag and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985), pp. 342-44.


There is only one reference to *hagios* as a single person: Phil. 4:21. There is some evidence that in the Apostles' creed *hominis hagios/sanctorum commune*, the Greek and Latin equivalent of communion of saints, was understood in the neutral sense as 'participation in the eucharistic elements' (cf. Josef Haing, *KOINONIA, 'Kirche' als Gemeinschaft bei Paulus. Biblische Untersuchungen* 16 (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1982, pp. 206ff). This would be without any parallel within the New Testament use of *hagios*. But it is still more plausible that the phrase meant the 'fellowship of holy persons' especially the communion with the martyrs and the redeemed in heaven (J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Creeds* [London: Longman, 3rd ed. 1972]), pp. 388-97.


Cf. Romans 6:13, 19. It may be noted that the phrase *synergis* theo 'co-workers of God' in 1 Cor. 3:9, which was so important to John Wesley, is not used by Paul to describe the efforts to live according to the will of God but to tell about the participation of the first Christian missionaries in the mission of God. But in the field of missionary work this deals with the inclusion of the activity of human beings within the activity of God as it is done in the field of personal salvation in Phil. 2:12f, a passage which was in the center of Wesley's theology (cf. sermon 85: *On Working Out Our Own Salvation; Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3, pp. 199-209).


Abstention from fornication as a first "condition" of sanctification is also mentioned in


29. Of course traces of the normal Jewish linguistic usage to speak of holy places are found in the New Testament, too (cf. Matt. 4:25; 24:15; 27:53; Acts 6:13; 21:28; Rev. 11:2; but see also 2 Pet. 1:18f.). The New Testament authors speak of “Holy Scriptures” (Rom. 1:2) or holy prophets (Luke 1:70; Acts 3:21) and in the post-pauline time also of holy apostles (Eph. 3:5f.). How much in the New Testament language of holiness itself there is still a cultic dimension is debated (cf. O. Procksch, ThWNT 112: “spiritualized, but never totally disappeared” and contrary to him Horst Balz, EWNT 1:47: “Es wäre dennoch verfehlt, die Heiligkeit der Glaubenden im NT als kultisch bestimmt und vermittelt verstehen zu wollen.” = holiness in the N.T. is not influenced or shaped by the dimension of cult.
