

Are You a Saint or an Ain't?

by Art Farstad

Many well-meaning Christians are not well taught on this supremely important and practical subject. A common phrase heard in Christendom (and sadly even by supposedly evangelical Christians) is “I’m a *Christian*, but I’m no *saint*.” The idea is that while we can expect a person to go to church, give money, and keep away from the grosser sins, don’t expect too much more.

Actually, if you’re not a *saint*, you’re not *saved*! Don’t misunderstand this: we are not saying that if you’re not very *saintly* you’re not saved.

First Corinthians is addressed to the church “at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours” (1 Cor 1:2). Yet just read the epistle! The Corinthians were proud, divisive, litigious, careless and selfish at the Lord’s Supper and *agape* (love feast), and permissive of gross sin (incest) in one of the believers.¹

Why would Paul call the Corinthians “saints” if they were so unsaintly? The answer lies in the different usages of the root words that are used for *sanctification* in both Testaments.

English, unfortunately for us, used Anglo-Saxon-based words (*holy*, *holiness*) and Latin-based (*sanctify*, *sanctification*, *saint*, *saintly*) to translate the same cluster of words in the original. In the OT the words are from the Semitic root *qdsh*. In the NT they translate words with the *hagiroot*.² The basic meaning of all these words is the same: “to set apart for a special use.” In contexts of “sanctification”, this will be for a good use, and one for God’s will and pleasure.³

Sanctification involves a believer’s conduct and character. It is both *negative* and *positive*.

Too many conservative Christians accentuate the negative, as in the somewhat light-hearted (but often accurate) summary of some people’s idea of sanctification: “I don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t chew, or run with those who do.”

To be sure, there is a strong negative side to the doctrine. We are to be separated or set apart from evil. First Thessalonians 4:3 speaks of progressive sanctification as having to do with turning away from immorality—so rampant in today’s culture, as it was in the days when the NT was written.

However, we should not merely become set apart *from evil*, but we should be positively set apart and dedicated *to God*. In OT times a person could sanctify his house (Lev 27:14), part of his field (Lev 27:16), or his firstborn (Num 8:17). If OT believers could do so, surely we NT believers should be able to set apart our homes, cars, and possessions, for

God's use! We can dedicate our children through prayer and a consistent example. In the final analysis, though, they will have to consecrate their own lives to Christ's holy service.

NOTES

¹ There is no suggestion that the incestuous man was unsaved, but rather that he might be removed in death if he didn't change his ways.

² As in our English derivative, *hagiography* (a biography of a saint). This double set of root words needlessly complicates things, although giving a richer vocabulary than possessed by any other tongue.

³ That the word doesn't always mean "make saintly" is clear from the fact that the Hebrew root *qdsh* is used for those set aside to be cult prostitutes, including sodomites!

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