

Article 1 Call

One of the curious aspects of holiness in the Bible is how things such as the Sabbath and temple utensils are regarded as holy.¹ This is puzzling because we tend to think of holiness as an attribute of persons—God and humans. But the fact that even things can be holy gives us an important insight. To be holy is to be placed in a special relationship to God. Because God is holy, anything that stands in this relationship becomes holy just because of that relationship. The Sabbath, for example, is holy because God distinguished it from the other six days and because it has a special relationship to God—it is a reminder of God’s creative activity and resting. The utensils are holy because they have been consecrated for exclusive use in the worship of God. So, anything that God has chosen to be specially related to is holy. Deuteronomy 7:6 affirms this point: “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples of earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (NRSV). Israel was holy because God had separated it from the other nations and brought it into a relationship of belonging.

When the New Testament speaks about our being separated and placed in relation to God, it uses the term ‘called’. To be called is to be addressed by God. And, for beings made in the image of God, it means our capacity to respond to that call. Holiness, then, is more than just being called. It also involves our response in the form of consecration and faithful obedience. So, while we are holy because we are called and placed in relationship to God, we must respond to that call in order to be holy. We are both called unto holiness and also holy because we are called—because God has separated us from the fallen world and brought us into a relationship of belonging.

However, being called is the basic meaning of holiness. It is the basic meaning because God’s act of calling us is always the first step in our becoming holy. If we forget this fact, then we are tempted to think of holiness as something that we alone accomplish by consecrating ourselves or by obeying God’s commands. Holiness becomes our achievement. But the gospel of grace tells us otherwise. Although consecration and obedience are vital in the pursuit of holiness, they are our response to God’s initiative and to God’s grace. They presuppose God’s call to us.

What is the nature of this relationship to which we are called? It is more than just being used for God’s service. According to the Bible, Pharaoh, the Babylonians and Cyrus were all chosen by God to be instruments of God’s will. But they were not for that reason holy. Their relationship with God was strictly temporary and lacking in intimacy. They did not belong to God as Israel belonged to God. It is different with creatures that are called into a holy relationship. First, this relationship is not temporary but everlasting. As Paul stated, “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29). In spite of Israel’s sin and the church’s failings, God’s covenant is an everlasting one. Second, this holy relationship is marked by unusual intimacy and belonging. Hosea likened Israel’s relation to God to the relation of a wife to a husband. Paul saw the church as the bride of Christ and as the body of Christ. The church is as close to Christ as branches are to the vine that gives them life. To be holy is to be called by God into a relationship that is everlasting and that means our belonging to God.

This holy relationship also has a close connection to worship. As 1 Peter says of the church, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may

¹See Exodus 40:1-11 on utensils.

proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9). Like Israel, the church is a chosen, holy nation. We have been called out of darkness into God’s light. Moreover, we are a nation of priests. But why are we a nation of priests? So that we may “offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (2:5). Like the priests of Israel, the church offers sacrifice to God—the sacrifice of thanksgiving, praise, and good works (Hebrews 12:28, 13:15-16). That is why we must maintain our holiness through consecration and faithful obedience, for (like the ancient priests) those who stand before God in worship must be holy.

Finally, this relationship of belonging pertains first of all to the whole community of the people of God—first Israel, then the church. Only secondarily should we think of individuals being chosen and called. It is the church that “has been chosen in Christ from the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless” (Ephesians 1:4). It is the church as the body of Christ that stands in an everlasting relationship of belonging to God. It is the church as the bride of Christ that has been made holy “with the washing of water by the word” (Ephesians 5:26). God calls individuals to become members of this called, holy community. As we enter this community and as we consecrate ourselves and respond to God’s grace with faithful obedience, we participate in the church’s relationship with God. We belong to God because we belong to the church. We are holy because we are members of this holy priesthood.

Holiness requires consecration and faithful obedience. But it rests on God’s call to us in Jesus Christ to enter the body of Christ and, as holy priests, to offer spiritual sacrifices. The church’s constant prayer is that it may continue to hear the call of God, to respond faithfully to it, and to live in a way that honors that call. In doing this, the church will be the holy people of God.