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**“Hagios” in Pauline Letters as Reference to our
Status as the People of God**

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The meaning of the adjective *hagios* in the Pauline corpus is much like one finds throughout the NT.² It refers to the sacred, set apart, nature of a thing, a person, or God himself.³ Mostly, in the letters of Paul and in the NT, one sees its usage as an adjective in reference to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is the empowering force of the Christian church, thus, it is most appropriate the adjective

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² Letters of Paul I mean all thirteen. For a strong critique of the conventional scholarly view that Paul only authored seven letters, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction*, AB 35A (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

³ BDAG, ἅγιος.

would be used primarily in reference to him. God the Father is known as holy. In the Lord's prayer, his name is to be recognized as set apart (Matt 6:9). The Son, too, is known as holy.⁴ In his earthly ministry, he is even recognized by demons as the "holy one of God." In one of the prayers of Acts, Jesus is referenced as God's "holy child."⁵

But in the Pauline corpus, it is intriguing to observe the substantive usage of *hagios*. When Paul uses the term as a substantive, he is discussing the "saints."⁶ These are the *ekklesia*, God's elect, those whom he has chosen to come out from the world to be a separate people for himself. The use of the term to address and discuss these people is most appropriate. With its background as a cultic term, the term denotes a purified status, when a thing has been cleansed from its ritual contaminates. Thus, as God's chosen vessels, these people have been cleansed by God, "sanctified," to be God's people. That is, they have not only been designated by God by choice. They are not only holy by God's choosing, i.e., holy by association with the holy God. They are also holy because of the activity of God in them and with them. Their association with God enables them to shed the contaminants of the unholy world and they, then, are found better acquainted with the things of heaven. The term as a substantive, then, denotes both positional and moral status before God in the Pauline corpus.

I will argue in this paper that the *hagioi* are those who are so because they are in deep relationship with God and that their behavior reflects this deep relationship. In most of his extant letters, Paul seems to use the term as a mere title, another way of referring to the members of the church. The variety of terms used, however, to refer to the people of God is no mere rhetorical embellishment. Paul is not using these closely related terms simply to add diversity to the way he discusses the church. Rather, the terms, and this term in particular, I will argue, is used to affirm already attained sacral position before

⁴ Acts 4:27, 30.

⁵ Mark 1:24.

⁶ Many of the scriptures that include this translation are Rom 1:2; 8:27; 12:13; 15:25-26; 15:31; 1 Cor 1:2; 6:1-2; 14:33; 16:1, 15; 2 Cor 1:1, 8:4; 9:1, 12; 13:13; 1 Thess 3:13.

God as his holy people and to urge behavior which increases an ethical conduct which bespeaks this status.

To establish my argument, I will focus primarily on Paul's usage of the nominative form, *hagiasmos*, of the *hagios* in 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians. The adjectival-nominative forms of the term do not provide much explanation for what Paul may have intended. The meaning seems assumed. But other forms help elucidate the meaning and thus provide better in-roads for what Paul may have thought God's people were to be as "saints." The two aforementioned epistles provide the most helpful information for what Paul probably meant when he referred to the church as *hagioi* and will therefore provide the most fertile soil for offering us a helpful explication of the term.

Before turning to these Epistles, however, it will be helpful to seek guidance from OT sources. These, I believe, offer the necessary foundation for Paul's theological reasoning for designating God's people as *hagioi*. This foundational exploration will enable us to have better insight into Paul's usage.

It seems most appropriate to begin an investigation on Paul's use of the term *hagios* in a book whose essential aim is discussing holiness, Leviticus.⁷ To be sure, both Genesis and Exodus both engage the subject matter, but Leviticus is primarily focused on certifying that Israel, God's people maintain holiness. As a book which sets the rules for the sacrificial cult for Israel, defining the requirements for holiness is fundamental.

Leviticus provides in meticulous detail the rites for participation in sacrifice to YHWH. This was the prescribed method of relationality between God and Israel. To be sure, prayer and supplication were fundamental, but sacrifice was essential to God's ongoing relationship with his people. The fact that prescriptions were given as to the nature and kind of offerings to be given by God

⁷ On Leviticus, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3A (New York: Doubleday, 1991); idem, *Leviticus 17-22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3A (London; New Haven; Yale University Press, 2008); idem, *Leviticus 23-27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3A (New York: Doubleday, 2001); Erhard Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

himself suggests that sacrifice had much to do with pleasing him. Leviticus begins with YHWH instructing Moses concerning the sacrifices, “The LORD summoned Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying: ² Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When any of you bring an offering of livestock to the LORD, you shall bring your offering from the herd or from the flock.” From the tent, the place where God dwelled in the midst of his people, the book avers that YHWH’s concern was to instruct the people on how to bring offerings to him. His relationship with them was contingent on their being obedient to his will and way. Part of this was how they were supposed to bring things in sacrifice to him. Thus, the majority of the book concerns the kinds of offerings YHWH deems worthy of his attention. That which YHWH has designated worthy of his attention, something that he desires, is deemed *qodesh* (MT), *hagios* (LXX), “holy” (Lev 2:3).

For *people* to be “holy” or “sanctified” unto the Lord, Moses proscribes many possible foods. Moses says to them:

41 All creatures that swarm upon the earth are detestable; they shall not be eaten. 42 Whatever moves on its belly, and whatever moves on all fours, or whatever has many feet, all the creatures that swarm upon the earth, you shall not eat; for they are detestable. 43 You shall not make yourselves detestable with any creature that swarms; you shall not defile yourselves with them, and so become unclean. 44 For I am the LORD your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming creature that moves on the earth. 45 For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy. 46 This is the law pertaining to land animal and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms upon the earth, 47 to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean, and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten (Lev 11:41-47).

Moses begins with the unclean animals. These are not to be eaten by an Israelite who hopes to be designated clean and worthy to enter the tent of the Lord. Only those who are clean before the Lord can hope to enter into God’s holy place. In part, it seems, relationality, the ability to enter into God’s space to engage God in prayer and intimacy, is contingent upon one’s ability to be deemed pure by him. These animals, in addition to a host of other things, disable the

devotee from being able to enter the Lord's intimate space, and, necessarily, distances him from the Lord.

Instead, Moses says God requires holiness. The Lord demands that they become "holy, for I am holy" (11:44). The Lord is *qadosh* and he requires his people to mimic his nature. The people are to imitate their God, and thus, they must put away from themselves things that can defile them. It must be assumed that this is because YHWH is the same. He does not desire that which defiles, and so his people are to keep away from such things.

This holiness is also part of recognition of their salvation. The Lord reminds them that he is the one who brought them out of the land of Egypt (11:45). Their salvation was for them to recognize him as their God. As such, they are to mimic him and him alone. As he is holy, they are to be holy.

These passages from Leviticus describe holiness to require two essential factors. First, there is a certain kind of separation. God's people are supposed to distinguish themselves from what God deems common. From the sacrifices that Moses shared were special to the Lord to the kinds of foods God proscribed for his people, the people were required to be particular. Holiness suggested that not everything they offered would be acceptable to God and not everything that could be eaten would make the people holy. What God wanted from the sacrifices was holy to him, it was to be kept only for the Lord. And, what God said was licit for the people to eat, would keep them from defiling themselves. They could only remain holy by following the diet provided by the Lord.

Second, divine mimicry is also necessary.⁸ As the Lord is holy, separated from that which is common, so too must his people be separate.⁹ Holiness requires that the devotee not only obey YHWH's commands, he must also behave in a manner as YHWH. He must remain separate from that which defiles. Consequently, he recognizes YHWH as his true savior, as the God who delivered him from the

⁸ Divine mimicry is a major part of OT theology. See John Barton, "Imitation of God in the Old Testament," in *The God of Israel*, ed. R.P. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 35–47.

⁹ Isaiah 6:1-7.

bondage of slavery. Holiness, then, is both part of ritual *and* part of right behavior. Godliness, behaving in a manner consonant with God, is living out holiness.

Deuteronomy introduces a perspective on holiness different from what we see in Leviticus.¹⁰ There, Moses refers to God's people as "saints." Thus, being holy is not merely behavioral, the consequence of sacrifices and obedience to YHWH, it is also a designation, a sobriquet: "This is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Israelites before his death."² He said: The LORD came from Sinai, and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran. With him were myriads of holy ones; at his right, a host of his own.³ Indeed, O favorite among peoples, all his holy ones were in your charge; they marched at your heels, accepted direction from you" (Deut 33:1-3). Here, the NRSV has, "holy ones," but the base term *qodesh* is operative here. Moses is discussing God's holy people, those who will travel alongside of him to insist on proper fealty to his law. In this way, the term connotes positionality. By their allegiance to YHWH, they are thereby regarded as his holy people.

We see something similar to this in the book of Daniel.¹¹ When discussing the eschatological landscape of the ages, Daniel discusses God's people as his "saints:"

²¹ As I looked, this horn made war with the holy ones and was prevailing over them,²² until the Ancient One came; then judgment was given for the holy ones of the Most High, and the time arrived when the holy ones gained possession of the kingdom.²³ This is what he said: "As for the fourth beast, there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth that shall be different from all the other kingdoms; it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces."²⁴ As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise, and another shall arise after them. This one shall be different from the former ones, and shall put down three kings.²⁵ He shall speak words against the Most High, shall wear out the holy ones of the Most High, and shall attempt to change the sacred seasons and the law; and they shall be given into his power for a time, two times, and

¹⁰ On Deuteronomy, see Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

¹¹ On Daniel, see Carol A. Newsom and Brennan Breed, *Daniel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, Ky; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014). Also on Jewish Apocalypticism, see John J. Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015).

half a time. ²⁶ Then the court shall sit in judgment, and his dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and totally destroyed. ²⁷ The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them." ²⁸ Here the account ends. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly terrified me, and my face turned pale; but I kept the matter in my mind.

Again, the NRSV calls these people, "holy ones," but like Deuteronomy, the base term is *qodesh*. They are called "saints" in contrast to the evil ones, the horns who make war against them and God. These figures are said to attempt to change both the sacred calendar and the holy law. And they will even appear to prevail over the "saints." But assurance is given to the people of God, they will "possess the kingdom." Moreover, "their kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them." Note the gravity of the language used to discuss these people. They will have possession of the kingdom and people will serve and obey *them*. These are things typically spoken in reference to God. God is the King of Glory (Ps 24:7). He is the one to be served and obeyed. Yet, Daniel refers to God's people as those who will be obeyed and served. How can this be? As in Deut 33, these people are probably deemed holy, not only because of their behavior, but also because of their position. These are God's elect, his chosen, those who live and work alongside of YHWH himself. Because of their position with YHWH they are called his "saints." Because of their position, they will take on his characteristics in the world. They reign as he reigns. They share in his glory. The NT will later pick up on this, as I will show in 1 Cor 6, but this co-regency with the saints most explicitly discussed in Revelation. There, the people of God are often called the "saints." They are also promised to share the throne of Jesus as he shares his Father's throne (Rev 3:21). To be a "saint," then, means to be in a position close to YHWH. Because they are his people, because they are close to him, they are designated as "holy" as his "saints." Thus, they can be trusted with the kingdom. They can be trusted with rule. Those who are close to YHWH, because they are his holy people, can have others come and obey them. Since, they are holy, since they are close to the Lord, designated to be his, then it makes sense for the nations to treat them as they would treat YHWH.

Positional and behavioral holiness, then, are not mutually exclusive. In truth, they are complementary. The behavior of the “saint” must be assumed of those who are part of this team which YHWH has assembled. Similarly, the position of the saint must be assumed of those who are chosen to take part in divine mimicry. Behavior and position, then, are necessary foundational concepts to be understood when discussing holiness in Jewish thought. To be sure, I understand these as heuristic devices, primarily. There is no evidence that Jews neatly divided positional and behavioral holiness. But, as I will show, seeing the term in this way allows us to understand the angles from which Paul may want us to understand the concept of *hagios* for the people of God. I will first look at 1 Thess 4, which gives a better angle on *hagios* from a behavioral perspective. Then, I will look at 1 Cor 6, which provides a more positional angle.

1 Thessalonians is said by scholars to be Paul’s earliest extant written epistle.¹² In the letter, he deals with a broad range of issues. The longest discussion, however, belongs to an autobiographical sketch of his and the Thessalonian community’s life in Christ. From chapters 1-3, he mentions the problems and triumphs of his own personal journey and theirs as well.¹³ The concluding verses of chapter 4 and on into chapter 5 are primarily eschatological in focus. He addresses the coming of Jesus, the resurrection of the dead, and the oncoming calamities of the end of the age. Overall, Paul addresses a variety of things. But central for our considerations is his discussion of holiness, which comes in 4:1-8. It is appropriate that Paul would address the issue of holiness right before he switches to a discussion of the coming of Christ. The collocation of these two discussions is intentional. Those who should expect to inhabit the world to come and live out the rest of their existence with Christ should be holy, of course.

The passage is given as an exhortation on ethical matters.¹⁴ Holiness is construed as the outworking of moral living, no immoral

¹² Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 13.

¹³ Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 95-215.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, *Thessalonians*, 224, sees the primary focus of this discussion to be marriage.

sexual behavior, lust, and exploitation of others. It becomes clear as one reads this passage that Paul means to express holiness as a lifestyle:

¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; ⁴ that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, ⁵ not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷ For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you. (1 Thess 4:1-8 NRSV).

Paul's major point is that people should do what is pleasing to God (4:1).¹⁵ This language alludes to Gen 1 when God saw what he had made and it was good. At the end of the creation narrative, God looked at all he had made and declared it "very good" (Gen 1:31).¹⁶ God was happy with what he had made. In similar fashion, Paul urges the believers to make God happy. God should be pleased with their behavior. They should strive, if they are not doing so, to increase God's happiness with them "more and more."

Paul moves in 4:3 to define what this pleasing disposition is.¹⁷ Their "sanctification" (*hagiasmos*). He, then, goes on to define what this sanctification looks like. It involves eschewing sexual immorality and communal exploitation. To be sure, Paul's admonitions should not be limited to these moral issues but Paul's point is clear. Their behavior is a reflection of their "sanctification." Who they are as "saints" is reflected by how they behave.

And the kind of behavior is important. Paul is not, here, focused on simply how they behave towards God. Yes, these ethical issues impact one's relationship with God. But these are issues that involve

¹⁵ Ibid, *Thessalonians*, 219, says that this the "goal" of ethics for Paul.

¹⁶ Also, see Gen 5:22.

¹⁷ Ibid, *Thessalonians*, 225, suggests that "sanctification" is at the "heart of Christian morality" for Paul.

other people. Sexual immorality, theft, exploitation, etc., are communal moral issues. God is concerned with how people treat each other in community. Paul is radical in that he calls bad behavior “impurity” (4:7). This term is typically used in cultic contexts. But Paul uses to repudiate sinful behavior. For Paul, cleanliness and holiness before God are no longer concerns of *kosher* as it was in Leviticus. They are of how people are treated. It is easy to see this in issues of sex but Paul includes thievery as an issue that also tarnishes purity among God’s people.

As a cultic issue, an issue that involves relationality with God, Paul makes this paramount. This is why Paul identifies rejection of his counsel as rejection of the counsel of God. God is the one who wants his people to live a certain way to be in proper relationship with them. And furthermore, to reject this counsel is to reject the sanctifying agent whom God have them, the Holy Spirit. By disobedience, they fall in danger of what Paul describes elsewhere as frustrating the Spirit (Eph 4:30).

By framing argument this way, Paul has made it clear. It is the presence of God in his Spirit that gives holiness. It is God’s presence among them that allows them to be his sanctified people. But to live out this sanctified existence, to be *hagioi*, they must behave as if the Lord’s presence is among them. They must be willing to treat people properly and obey the commands of the Lord. Sexual immorality and exploitation of others are things that do not align with the character of God. Therefore, they must be rejected by God’s people who hope to imitate God.

I now turn to 1 Corinthians which provides more of a positional angle on holiness in God’s eyes. Like 1 Thessolonians, this letter also addresses a great many things.¹⁸ It primarily concerns the issues of division in the church at Corinth. People were fighting amongst

¹⁸ One of the most masterful commentaries on the epistle is Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to The Corinthians*, Revised., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014); On the divisiveness in the Corinthian community, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NICGT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1-33; Also, see L.L. Welborn, “On the Discord in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Ancient Politics,” *JBL* 106.1 (1987): 85–111.

themselves for many different reasons. One of was litigiousness.¹⁹ In 1 Cor 6, Paul berates the Corinthians for their unwillingness to settle disputes in he would deem a godly manner. Instead, they were taking each other to court. Paul thinks that these issues are most appropriately dealt with in the church, before the “saints” (6:1-8). These were meant to be God’s agents of rule this world and the world to come. Because of the widespread concern for Corinthian wanton behavior, their denial of who they are before God in their behavior, Paul includes a vice list with a dire warning of what happens to wicked people:

⁹ Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, ¹⁰ thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers-- none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. ¹² ‘All things are lawful for me, ‘but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be dominated by anything. ¹³ ‘Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food,’ and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.¹⁴ And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. (1 Cor 6:9-14)

Paul is clear, people who behave in such a manner will not inherit the kingdom; they will not enter the world to come.²⁰ But Paul is just as quick to mention the status, the position of “saints.” While holding the proper position in Christ, they are “washed,” “sanctified,” and “justified” (6:11). Through Christ’s work on their behalf, and because they have believed in him, they hold a position as the “saints of the Most High.” They are designated as clean before the pure God because of their position in Christ. Their behavior is important, but here Paul is emphasizing their status. As God’s people, they are deemed by God as pure before him because they are his people. And

¹⁹ Fee, *Corinthians*, 252-273. On litigation in Corinth, see Bruce W. Winter, “Civil Litigation in Secular Corinth and the Church: The Forensic Background to 1 Corinthians 6.1-8,” *NTS* 37 (1991): 559–72; A. C. Mitchell, “Rich and Poor In The Courts of Corinth: Litigiousness and Status in 1 Corinthians 6.1-11,” *NTS* 139 (1993): 562–86.

²⁰ The mention of the kingdom of God in a discussion about the status of the “saints of the Most High” is definitely an allusion to Dan 7:21-27.

because they are his people they are endowed with God's sanctifying presence, the Holy Spirit.

The connection to the cult in Paul's reconfiguration of purity is also obvious here. Immediately, after describing the status of God's people, he goes right into a discussion of what might sound similar to a *kosher* discussion. But he seems to be using this discussion of food as a metaphor for talking about behavior. The conclusion of the entire matter, he says, is that the body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body (6:13-14). The fundamental argument Paul is making is that one's status, one's position in the Lord, is not disconnected from behavior. This is why in the concluding verses of the chapter (vv. 15-18) Paul addresses behavioral issues. Like 1 Thess 4, Paul concludes his discussion of saintliness as a rejection of sexual immorality. This is consistent with what we have said before, the body is the essential field of relationality between the human and the divine. What one does with the body demonstrates how one feels towards God. The *hagioi*, who are chosen to be God's people, must behave as if they have been positioned close to the who has made them sacred. Their closeness to God demands that they act like it.

In Paul, *hagios* has traits of both behavior and position. Paul's description of God's people as "saints" as *hagioi* is meant to suggest that they have been sanctified by God and they are, thereby, holy. Their behavior indicates this state of being and position before God. In 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, it is clear that God's presence is the sanctifying agent. The bestowal of God's Spirit makes the people pure from the evils of the world. But it is also expected that those who have the Spirit will behave in a manner consistent with the Spirit that leads them. The holy behavior and status cannot be discord.