

‘ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN’:  
THE VOCATION OF HOLINESS IN SCRIPTURE<sup>1</sup>  
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*Introduction*

Holiness in scripture is both vocation and identity. *Living* as God’s holy people can never be divorced from *being* God’s holy people. Scripture describes the vocation of holiness primarily through its narrative which shapes the social and personal identity of the people of God. Because scripture is a living and authoritative text for believers, it speaks the word of God afresh in new contexts. The text is re-read and re-authored<sup>2</sup> in different contexts in light of God’s ongoing self-disclosure culminating in Christ. Moreover, readers of the text become a text to be read by others (James 1:22-25). Readers themselves become a text . . . part of the vocation to *be holy as I am holy!*

This paper examines the way the narrative of God’s calling to the vocation of holiness is set out and then re-read at different points. It starts with Creation, the call of Abraham, the Exodus and life leading up to the Exile. The first re-reading occurs during the Exile. Next, the chapter looks at the New Testament, re-reading of the story in two parts: (1) following the Holy One God; and (2) living as God’s Holy People.

*Creation and Vocation*

The biblical narrative begins with the story of a holy God – creating, forming and shaping a holy people with a mission to embody his holiness in their way of life. The divine words create and bless, and Creation is structured and shaped by them. God’s actions fill the creation with “blessing and life” which are an integral part of God’s holiness.<sup>3</sup> Creation is good (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). The goodness of creation reaches its zenith in Gen 1:27-28. God creates humankind, male and female, in God’s image, blesses them and gives them a mission. As image bearers of the Creator, humans are “morally accountable for our actions” and represent God.<sup>4</sup> In a nutshell, humans are created to be holy in relationship with God, with one another and with the whole creation. Creation is indeed “very good” (Gen. 1:31) in harmonious relationships.

The disobedience of humankind, however, engenders chaos which leads to curse and death instead of blessing and life. Relationships between God and humankind, human and human, and

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a shortened and revised version of K E Brower and MiJa Wi, “‘On Earth as it is in Heaven’: The Vocation of Holiness in Scripture” in *The Vocation of Holiness* ed by Al Truesdale (Kansas City: The Foundry, forthcoming), Chapter Two. It owes much to students and colleagues at NTC over the years.

<sup>2</sup> This occurs within scripture itself, in the Old Testament but especially in the New Testament, with its “figural reading”. The term is Richard Hays’ in *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel* (Waco: Baylor, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Andy Johnson, *Holiness and the Missio Dei* (Eugene: Cascade, 2016), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy C. Tennent, *The Call to Holiness: Pursuing the Heart of God for the Love of the World* (Franklin: Seedbed, 2014), 13.

human and creation are marred (Gen. 3). No longer is God's holy presence a blessing, but becomes a threat.<sup>5</sup> No longer does human community cherish living together, but descends to injustice and violence. No longer is the relationship between God's creation and human community symbiotic, but becomes parasitic and exploitative. Death as separation from the source of life comes onto the scene. The more humankind multiplies and grows, the more it seems that human violence and wickedness increase. Not only is every inclination of the human heart evil, but the earth is also full of violence (Gen. 6:5, 11).

Nevertheless, the narrative of a holy God continues. God unceasingly reaches out, relates to and restores human community to his mission. He calls and sets apart agents of blessing and life for the rest of his creation.

### *Holy God, Holy People*

The holy God not only creates but also calls. In Gen. 12:1-3, God calls Abram to be a blessing to all people. In turn, Abram obeys and follows the call (Gen. 12:4) and believes him (15:6). In Gen 17:1, he is called to: "Walk before [God Almighty] faithfully and be blameless".<sup>6</sup> Walking in the presence of God makes "be blameless" possible.<sup>7</sup>

Walking as a way of life is elaborated in Genesis 18:19. Abraham's call and blessing entails walking in the way of the Lord, manifesting who God is. What causes God to "go down to" Sodom and Gomorrah is not only their grave sin. He hears the cry for help (see Gen. 18:21) of those who suffer from violence and injustice, and comes to act against the oppressors.<sup>8</sup> Abraham's plea for Sodom (Gen. 18:23-32) reveals a God who is willing to extend mercy instead of destroying even those who are unrighteous and unjust.<sup>9</sup>

"Holy" occurs the second time when God calls Moses (Exod. 3:5). Moses' call is set in the context of the "outcry" of the Israelites who suffer from slavery, oppression, violence and even genocide (Exod. 2:23-25). God responds to their sufferings and comes to deliver them. Here God's holiness is revealed, and the self-disclosure of "the divine name acquires content."<sup>10</sup> Moses is called to participate in the divine acts of deliverance. The very character of God "as holy, as compassionate, as deliverer" is disclosed in the account of the call of Moses.<sup>11</sup>

The call narratives culminate when God creates and calls Israel to be "[his] treasured possession", "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6). Here holiness is indeed an *identity* given to Israel. They are called to live out this holy identity as their *vocation* "both in

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson, 8.

<sup>6</sup> 'Blameless' is not the same as 'flawless'.

<sup>7</sup> Won Keun Oh, "Holiness of Abraham in Genesis and in the Rewritten Bible" (PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 2007), 75–77.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2006), 367.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, 16.

<sup>10</sup> James E. Robson, "Forgotten Dimensions of Holiness," *HBT* 33 (2011): 133.

<sup>11</sup> Robson, 133.

relation to [God] and also in relation to other nations”.<sup>12</sup> Israel is called to be a blessing to all the peoples and the whole earth through her priestly role (Exod. 19:5).<sup>13</sup>

Israel’s holiness, understood in terms of its distinction from the surrounding nations, is to be embedded in its daily life (Lev. 18:2-3). They were to live out their holy identity by acting justly and rightly in relation to others, and the whole creation.<sup>14</sup> Leviticus 19 make holiness concrete as embodied in all areas of life. It begins with the imperative: “Be holy because, I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Lev. 19:2). The command to be holy is founded upon the basis of Israel’s special relation to a holy God (Lev. 19:2; 20:26).

A call to imitate God’s holiness in Leviticus 19 combines ritual and ethical aspects of holiness.<sup>15</sup> And Israel’s holiness has to be characterized by its just and right dealings with those who are particularly vulnerable in the community. The vocation of holiness is articulated in positive and inclusive terms. It combines justice with mercy, and extends to loving neighbours and immigrants alike (Lev. 19:18, 34).

Thus far, God’s holiness is revealed and stated in who he is and what he has done. As Creator, his divine acts of creation bring blessing and life. As a merciful God, he attends to the cries for help and looks compassionately upon the oppressed. As a mighty saviour, he delivers the oppressed and executes righteousness and justice.

#### *Living in the Land: Kings and Prophets*

With the presence and guidance of a holy God, Israel arrives at the Promised Land which is also a land of strangers and enemies. God’s call to walk in his ways and to choose life and blessing faces real challenges as Israel encounters other nations. How does the Bible, particularly in the story of violence and conquest in Joshua, describe Israel’s vocation of holiness?

Violence is the most problematic, if not distressing question to address in understanding the vocation of holiness. To be sure, scripture was written in a time when “[t]he massacre of populations was commonplace.”<sup>16</sup> That fact, however, cannot eliminate the problem.

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<sup>12</sup> Jo Bailey Wells, *God’s Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology* (JSOTSup 305; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 28. “From Exodus 3, holiness is tied up with the knowledge of God as Yhwh.”

<sup>13</sup> Wright, 372. “Being holy did not mean that the Israelites were to be a specially religious nation. A fundamental part of the meaning of the word is “different or distinctive.” Something or someone is holy when set apart for a distinct purpose and kept separate for that purpose. For Israel, it meant being different by reflecting the very different God that YHWH revealed himself to be, compared with other gods. Israel was to be as different from other nations as YHWH was different from other gods.”

<sup>14</sup> Wells, 60.

<sup>15</sup> See Mary Douglas, “Justice as the Cornerstone: An Interpretation of Leviticus 18–20.” *Interpretation* 53 (1999): 348.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2015), 209.

Interpretation of ancient texts also faces the challenge of whether they are to be read literally or metaphorically. Can we apply these texts as divine mandates to practice similar violence?

By no means. They need to be heard as strong warnings against sinful acts, but not to be taken literally. Similarly, Israel's particular identity as God's chosen people requires undivided loyalty, but at the same time needs to be embodied in their relations with others. We need to hear stories of mercy in the midst of war and violence: Rahab, and the Gibeonites show that joining God's people is always a possibility regardless of ethnic or religious backgrounds. Living in the Promised Land, Israel is repeatedly reminded that she is to show mercy and justice to foreigners living among them; she too was once a foreigner in Egypt.<sup>17</sup>

Beginning with the reign of David, Israel established a hereditary monarchy. Kings defend the cause of the poor—the fatherless, widows, and foreigners (Ps. 72). Kings must embody God's reign for this “particular” covenant, with its “universal” effect, to succeed. Thus, the vocation of holiness for rulers is twofold: (1) to lead their people to follow God unreservedly; and (2) to rule them with justice, that is, to rule “not by power but by their concern for the powerless; not by wealth but by how they treat the poor”.<sup>18</sup> A king's responsibility is to build a just society. Failure to do this is judged by the Prophets.

Isaiah begins with God's condemnation of Judah and Jerusalem for their inequity (Isa. 1:2-4). Their worship is detestable before God because of injustice and their oppression of the vulnerable (Isa. 1:12-17, 21-23). Ritual purity is inseparable from social justice. Israel, called to bring life and blessing, has become “a channel for oppression and injustice”.<sup>19</sup> Isaiah proclaims: “[God] looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress” (Isa. 5:7). In this context Isaiah champions God's holiness and reminds Israel of her vocation of holiness. God is the Holy One of *Israel*.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the Holy One of Israel is the Creator, Redeemer and Saviour of all the nations. But in spite of Isaiah's hope for universal restoration and renewal, failure to follow the way of the Lord leads Israel into Exile.

Was all hope lost? Not at all. Jeremiah promised a new covenant with Israel in which “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer. 31:33-34 NRSV). Ezekiel promised a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek. 36:26-27). These texts are central to the hopes of the people of God in their later re-reading of this narrative.

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<sup>17</sup> Sacks, 186. The problem of violence in the Christian sacred text remains. It must never be used by those whose vocation is to be holy to justify any violence against wickedness. God's purposes are life-giving, not death. Ultimately, the story of God deconstructs the human story of division, domination and violence. For Christians, only a re-reading of the narrative, understood in the light of the life-death-resurrection-ascension of the Messiah who absorbs rather than perpetuates violence, will challenge what Sacks (101) calls ‘altruistic evil: evil committed in a sacred cause, in the name of high ideals.’ For further discussion, see Kent Brower, ‘Holiness and Purity in a Post-Christian Age’ in *The Journal of Wesleyan Thought* 1, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Sacks, 236.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, 32.

<sup>20</sup> Wells, 136.

## *Re-Reading the Story: Part One*

### *Exile and Return*

In Ezra and Nehemiah the identity and vocation of Israel as God's holy people are re-shaped. The returned exiles restore the Temple and the Torah to renew their covenant with God and to renew covenant communities. The Exile strengthened their desire to be faithful to God and to enable God to return to dwelling in their midst.

But in the process, holiness as separation becomes dominant in their interpretation of "the function of the Temple and the Torah."<sup>21</sup> The returned exiles refuse help from the people of the land in rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 4:3). They exclude those of foreign descent from worshipping in the Temple (Neh. 13:3). The Temple is no longer envisioned as a house of prayer of all nations, but an exclusive place of worship for ethnically pure Israel. A call to be holy is no longer for God in service to others, but separation from the people of the land. Identity becomes an exclusive possession. The returned exiles understand their identity as a holy seed (Ezra 9:2) which refers to genealogical purity. They establish an impenetrable boundary based on lineage.

The re-reading of the Torah's prohibition against intermarriage with certain nations is expanded or intensified, if not misinterpreted. In the Torah, unjust and immoral ways of other nations are the main concern regarding the prohibition of intermarriage (Deut. 7:3-4; 23:2-6). But after the Exile the prohibition is interpreted as defilement of Israel's holiness. It is therefore used to establish boundaries. Keeping Israel's identity as a holy seed becomes its vocation. Israel maintains its genealogical purity by prohibiting intermarriage. They no longer cleanse themselves by promoting justice and righteousness: holiness becomes defined as protection against ethnic impurity. So separation becomes a watchword during the postexilic period.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Rise of Holiness movements*

The return from Exile has happened, but Israel is still overrun by Gentiles and has a sense of remaining in exile.<sup>23</sup> As hostility and resistance to Gentile power and influence intensify, the quest for holiness as separation increases.<sup>24</sup> It serves to maintain and preserve identity as God's chosen people, and it insures "future security" as a nation.<sup>25</sup> With this understanding of holiness, purity and impurity become critical issues in the postexilic community. Hence, holiness movements emerge in various forms.

Two of them are instructive for our purposes. *First*, the Qumran community calls itself "the holy ones". To maintain their purity as the holy ones, separation from society becomes essential, including separation from other Jews. They exclusively apply "a holy nation and a

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<sup>21</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (London: Continuum, 1984), 67.

<sup>22</sup> Borg, 66.

<sup>23</sup> The view is controversial. See James F. Scott, ed., *Exile: A Conversation with N T Wright* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Borg, 71.

<sup>25</sup> Borg, 67.

kingdom of priests” (Exod. 19:6) to themselves. For the Qumran community, holiness as separation is both “means and end.”<sup>26</sup>

*Second*, unlike the Qumran community, the Pharisees “democratized” their understanding of Israel as “a holy nation and kingdom of priests” (Exod. 19:6). All Jews are called to be priests and are to keep purity regulations pertaining to the call to holiness. The Pharisees’ strict observation of purity laws is intended for “separation within society”.<sup>27</sup> Living in the land which is impure due to the presence of Gentiles, the Pharisees meticulously develop ways Israel can maintain purity in daily life.

### *Re-reading the Story: Part Two A*

#### *Following the Holy One of God*

Longings for restoration are reflected in Luke’s stories of the righteous people surrounding John’s and Jesus’ birth. Their hope is for a prophet like Moses, or the Messiah<sup>28</sup> who would herald renewal of the people of God under the son of David.

Into this scene comes John the Baptist. He is the link between the restoration hopes and the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. Scripture is re-read in that light. In words echoing Genesis 1, Luke pictures a new beginning through the Holy Spirit’s overshadowing of Mary. Her baby is son of Adam, son of God. Matthew’s genealogy recapitulates the line of Abraham that culminates in Jesus. He is the obedient son called out of Egypt who is also Emmanuel, “God with us”. For Mark, Isaiah’s “new thing” (Isa. 43:19) is happening in Jesus. It is signalled by the voice from heaven and the rending of heavens when the Spirit descends like a dove upon the beloved son. He is the true representative of the people of God. Jesus announces the arrival of the Kingdom of God (KG) in fulfilment of God’s promises.

This disclosure of Jesus’ identity is vital for understanding the renewal of God’s holy people. Jesus is *Messiah* Jesus, Son of God.<sup>29</sup> His identity is confirmed by the Voice from Heaven and revealed to the first four disciples by an unclean spirit—Jesus is the Holy One of God.<sup>30</sup> Only the centurion gives human voice to this confession (Matt. 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47), and he speaks more than he knows.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Alex R. G. Deasley, *The Shape of Qumran Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 214.

<sup>27</sup> Borg, 73.

<sup>28</sup> The literature on Messiah/s is vast. See, for instance, Stanley E. Porter, ed., *The Messiah in the Old and New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> While ‘son of god [υιοῦ θεοῦ] in Mark 1:1 is disputed on textual grounds, a strong case can be made for reading it on literary grounds.

<sup>30</sup> Arseny Ermakov, ‘The Holy One of God in Markan Narrative in *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 36 (2014), 159–84.

<sup>31</sup> See Brian K. Gamel, *Mark 15:39 as a Markan Theology of Revelation: The Centurion’s Confession as Apocalyptic Unveiling*. (LNTS 574; London: T&T Clark, 2017).

Jesus first calls four disciples.<sup>32</sup> Exorcisms and healings follow; they demonstrate God's opposition to evil and show compassion for the hurting. Jesus is re-constituting the holy people of God for their holy vocation: the announcement and inauguration of the kingdom. The culmination of the kingdom's beginning occurs in Mark 3:13-15. In a scene echoing Exodus 24, Jesus goes to the mountain, calls and names twelve apostles, who represent the twelve tribes (cf. Luke 22:28-30).<sup>33</sup>

For Jesus, ethnicity no longer matters. In Mark 3:31-35 (NRSV), Jesus' blood relations urge him to leave the throngs. Jesus' response is significant: "Who are my mother and brothers and sisters?" He answers his own question: "whoever does God's will". Jesus establishes a new social reality. His redefinition of "family" is both revolutionary and provocative. In Second Temple Judaism, genealogy lay at the heart of identity. This new definition of family changes all that.<sup>34</sup> The new covenant community is determined by proximity to the Holy One of God and to engaging in his mission.

The meal settings confirm Jesus' new community orientation. He eats with tax collectors and sinners.<sup>35</sup> Even the wealthy are invited to join. But their participation depends on their willingness to embrace the poor.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Jesus calls his followers to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect which Luke understands as mercy shown even to enemies.

#### *Re-defining Purity and Re-envisaging the Holiness Vocation*

Purity in Second Temple Judaism was a complex system designed to allow God to dwell in the midst of his people. Holiness was centred in the Temple. Extending from the Holy of Holies there were circles of holiness that required diverse levels of purity.<sup>37</sup>

Jesus challenges that system at its heart. The presence of God in the midst of his people is relocated to centre in Jesus.<sup>38</sup> The Spirit of God dwells in Jesus, the Holy One of God. In turn, in the power of the Spirit, he embodies and enacts God's rescue mission. In the Gospel of John, the

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<sup>32</sup> While the Gospels are a form of ancient biography, a significant secondary theme is that of discipleship. See Richard Burrige, *What are the Gospels?: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2004, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition); Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for all Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> For detailed discussion, see Kent E. Brower, *Mark: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. NBBC (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> See Brower, Mark, 116, Jesus is "gathering around himself a disparate group. . . . And he transforms them into his holy community—the restored kingdom of priests and the holy nation. . . . Their core characteristic is doing God's will."

<sup>35</sup> See J. Patrick Mullens, *Dining with Pharisees* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2004), Craig A. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> See Mi Ja Wi, *What Must We Do?: The Path to Salvation in Luke's Gospel*. LNTS XXX (London: T&T Clark, 2019).

<sup>37</sup> See Jenson.

<sup>38</sup> See Barton, "Dislocating and Relocating Holiness: A New Testament Study," in *Holiness*.

Word, who is God, becomes flesh and dwells among us. His body is now the temple of God--the dwelling of God among his people (John 1:14).

The relocation of holiness in Christ also “represented an extension and intensification of holiness. . . . The people, the land, the Temple and the Torah could be understood no longer as sufficient testimony to God’s presence in holiness.”<sup>39</sup> This meant re-defining the purity system.

Jesus challenges the contagion of impurity. He cleanses lepers, heals on the Sabbath, exorcises unclean spirits, and declares all food clean. Andy Johnson observes that “this dislocation of holiness [from being about] . . . separation from impurity and its relocation in the Spirit-inhabited, boundary-crossing Son of God is nothing less than a shakeup of cosmic proportion.”<sup>40</sup> Jesus’ actions display “the very character of God, and thus . . . the nature of holiness.”<sup>41</sup> Purity still matters, but it comes from within. It reflects the compassion, mercy and love at the heart of God, and it issues in community-affirming action.

### *Re-reading the Story: Part Two B*

#### *Living as People of the Spirit*

The call to a holy vocation that comes from Jesus is not for the distant future.<sup>42</sup> The age to come has dawned.<sup>43</sup> The central markers of the “last days” (Isa. 2:2; Micah 4:1) are the resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit. In Acts, the Twelve are re-constituted. The purification of God’s people, with a new heart of flesh and a new spirit within them, signals the arrival of the new day. God’s holiness will be displayed “through Israel’s restored life together.”<sup>44</sup>

Peter explains Pentecost in terms of Joel’s promised outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh, personally and corporately. Peter doesn’t know it yet, but that is ALL flesh, not just all Jewish flesh. And it includes daughters as well as sons, old as well as young. In short, this is Isaiah’s “new thing,” now coming to rest in the Spirit poured-out-on-all-flesh, the (re)new(ed) holy people of God whose vocation is to be the agent of God’s mission. The renewed people of God are empowered to bear witness to Christ, with signs of the new age confirming its arrival.

The stories in Acts are mould-breaking. The last days require a bold re-reading of scripture. Now this good news is centred in Jesus and the missional direction is re-configured. Instead of people streaming into Jerusalem, the message goes out from Jerusalem. The excluded, both Jews and Gentiles, are welcomed into the holy people of God, solely on the basis of the

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<sup>39</sup> Barton, 197.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, 103.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, 70.

<sup>42</sup> See Gabi Markusse, *Salvation in the Gospel of Mark: The Death of Jesus and the Path of Discipleship* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2018).

<sup>43</sup> See Michael J. Gorman, “‘You shall be Cruciform for I am Cruciform’: Paul’s Trinitarian Reconstruction of Holiness’ in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, 2007), 148–67.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, 116.



Spirit's work in their lives. The remapping of the purity universe continues: God creates the holy people of God by purifying their hearts by the work of the Spirit. This happens without reference to any of the usual scriptural criteria of what purity might look like and as interpreted by the "holiness people" of Jesus' day.

In their communal life, the holiness of God is displayed: no one is in need. Hospitality is a defining characteristic of God's holy people because they have been invited into the generous hospitality of the Triune God.<sup>45</sup> Without hospitality in word and deed, God's hospitable holiness is not displayed. It welcomes the stranger, embraces the alien, hosts the dispossessed, the refugee, the immigrant and the disabled at the table.<sup>46</sup> Inclusion of the marginalised and vulnerable into the hospitality of God's people is at the heart of reflecting God's character.

*Become who you are in Christ through the Spirit*

Although this vocational calling is intensely personal, it is never individualistic or isolationist. Followers of Jesus are 'holy ones', 'the saints'. They are reconciled to God through the death of Christ, brought into a right relationship with the Holy God, and receive the ministry of reconciliation. Their calling is due entirely to the faithfulness of Jesus, through whom God demonstrates his covenant faithfulness and love.<sup>47</sup> God's love in the community reflects the love between Father, Son, and Spirit, and so "binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col. 3:14 NRSV).

Those who are in Christ are a new creation; they display the image of the Creator. The identity markers of God's holy people describe Christlikeness: "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Col. 3:12). In that light the saints reflect the direction of God's good purposes in their life together. "There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised . . . but Christ is all in all" (cf. Col 3.10-15 NRSV). Marred relationships are restored. Traditional boundaries are challenged, divisions are abolished, diversity is celebrated because God's love has been poured out through the Holy Spirit. Divine justice is expressed in this community where the old hierarchies of race, gender and status are replaced by the patterns of the new community in Christ.

This new identity is summed up in one phrase: *in Christ*. This is participation language. Through God's incorporation of believers into Christ's body the people of God live lives of

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<sup>45</sup> See Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*. Baylor University Press (2019); Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church: A New Vision for the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Thomas E Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008). Parts of the church have always seen service amongst the marginalised as the vocation of holiness. Jean Vanier's well-known L'Arche communities epitomise this outlook. This service has to be set alongside the appalling stain on the church from its legacy of the abuse of the vulnerable.

<sup>47</sup> See Svetlana Khobnya, *The Father Who Redeems and the Son Who Obeys: Consideration of Paul's Teaching in Romans* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2013).

missional holiness in service to God and others.<sup>48</sup> So, if this is who you are, “count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11). The imperative of Paul’s language is based on the statement of identity – become who you are – and live into that identity in the power of the Spirit.

### *The Vocation of Missional Holiness*

The vocation of holiness is costly<sup>49</sup> because it actually challenges structures and the patterns of the world. It participates in the ongoing redemptive work of the Messiah. The vocation is “a real participation in this Triune God’s mission . . . [through] faithfulness to God and cruciform loving actions for others”.<sup>50</sup> Paul describes his own work as participating in “completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col 1:24 NRSV). Together, believers are called to be “colonies of cruciformity”.<sup>51</sup>

Paul is not alone in this view. The writer to the Hebrews re-reads Israel’s story as promise and example. His readers endure suffering as they “pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” They join Jesus “outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.” The journey implies impermanence: “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” so they must press on, following Jesus, *the pioneer and perfecter*. Separation is “displaced by *holiness as solidarity*, the solidarity of the great high priest in sharing human nature as flesh and blood and, above all, in accepting the defilement of death.”<sup>52</sup> This solidarity is worked out in the people of God.<sup>53</sup> Obedience is possible by establishment of the promised new covenant relationship through Christ.<sup>54</sup>

First Peter re-reads Israel’s holiness texts in light of Jesus’ example. Tellingly, readers are called ‘elect aliens.’ This is not a geographical or political statement, but is rather a theological description of people called to be holy as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:16).<sup>55</sup> It is a consequence of the new relationship to God and participation in God’s people. In fact, 2 Peter states that they are *participants of the divine nature* (2 Pet 1:4 NRSV); they share in God’s holiness by being transformed into the image of Christ.

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<sup>48</sup> See Michael J Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

<sup>49</sup> The classic expression of this was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1948 translation of the 1937 German *Nachfolge*). See Gorman, “You shall be cruciform.”

<sup>50</sup> Johnson, 152.

<sup>51</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001), 349, cited by Johnson, 127.

<sup>52</sup> Barton, 206, his italics.

<sup>53</sup> Barton, 208.

<sup>54</sup> See G. J. Thomas, ‘The Perfection of Christ and the Perfecting of Believers’ in *HENT*, 293-310.

<sup>55</sup> See Shively T. J. Smith, *Strangers to Family: Diaspora and 1 Peter’s Invention of God’s Household* (Waco: Baylor, 2016); Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

Life is difficult, but Christians are not to flee: “This was not at root a call for retreat from the world, but a vocation to identify with God’s own character.”<sup>56</sup> Suffering is endured but not sought. Indeed, suffering for its own sake is merely suffering (see 1 Peter 2:19-20) rather than a witness to Christ in the hostile context of social injustice. As a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, the saints’ vocation is “to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Pet 2:9 NRSV).

The “saints”, however, are not flawless. Failings affect vocation and require repentance and transformation. When Paul addresses the Corinthians as “the holy ones in Corinth”, eyebrows may be raised.<sup>57</sup> One Corinthian dispute involves the Lord’s Table: the behaviour of the powerful towards others shows contempt for the church (1 Cor. 11:22). For Paul, the Lord’s Table is missional because it proclaims the Lord’s death. But because of divisions, this is not happening. This same emphasis surfaces in Romans. The controversy over days, food and drink threatened community life. Without harmony, the Roman Christians were not able to bear witness to the God of peace (see Rom. 15:5-7). The focus is relentlessly on mission. Unity enables the display of God’s holiness before the world. Divisiveness does exactly the opposite. It evidences the chaos of broken relationships characteristic of the world apart from Christ. When conflicts, no matter how important, become paramount, they eclipse the mission of God.

### *Holy God with his Holy People in the Holy Place*

The culmination of the biblical story ends with the Holy God with his Holy People in the Holy Place.<sup>58</sup> The picture of the holy people is re-configured from “a single elect nation (e.g. Lev. 27:11-12, Ezek. 37:27), to a multi-cultural chorus of worshipers drawn from all the people of the world. . . . They are *hagioi* [holy] because they participate in the holiness of God” both in identity and in mission.<sup>59</sup>

### *Conclusion*<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Joel B. Green, ‘Living as Exiles: The Church in the Diaspora in 1 Peter’ in *HENT*, 322.

<sup>57</sup> Hans Frör, *You Wretched Corinthians! The Correspondence between the Church at Corinth* (London: SCM, 1995) for a reading that reflects the tension between Paul and his Corinthian converts.

<sup>58</sup> See Gordon J. Thomas, “A Holy God Among a Holy People in a Holy Place: The Enduring Eschatological Hope,” in *Eschatology in Bible & Theology: Evangelical Essays at the Dawn of a New Millennium*, ed. Kent E. Brower & Mark W. Elliott (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 53–69.

<sup>59</sup> Dean Flemming, ‘On Earth as it is heaven: Holiness and the People of God in Revelation’ in *HENT*, 347–48.

<sup>60</sup> These conclusions are a revision of Brower, ‘Holiness and Purity’, forthcoming.

The scriptural vocation of holiness is inextricably linked to the mission of God in Scripture. God calls and creates a holy people to participate in his rescue mission to his battered creation, bleeding from self-inflicted wounds that lead to death.

Three features stand out. *First*, we are to be holy as God is holy, reflecting who God is: loving, just, merciful, hospitable and missional. The vocation of holiness embodies these characteristics. This calling is for all of God's people, today. Our lives are part of the answer to the prayer: 'on earth as it is in heaven'. This holy calling is ours through the power of the Spirit in Christ.

*Second*, the vocation of holiness is a missional calling that embraces and loves the other. When we see others as persons created in God's image for whom Christ died, we respond in love. The otherwise excluded are welcomed by God's holy people because God names and loves them.

*Third*, the purity that matters is the pure-in-heart motivational centre of the person aligned with the will of God. This kind of purity is transformative in our communities of faith. It is God-reflecting: faithful, generous, open, welcoming, redemptive, transformative, compassionate love.

In the last question from his interlocutors, Jesus and the scribe agree that the heart of the vocation of holiness is to love God with all your being and your neighbour as yourself. On these hang all the law and the prophets. Mark concludes the episode: "After that no one dared to ask him any question" (12:34).

*As cited, we close by noting this paper is a shortened and revised version of Kent E. Brower and MiJa Wi, "'On Earth as it is in Heaven': The Vocation of Holiness in Scripture" in The Vocation of Holiness edited by Albert Truesdale (Kansas City: The Foundry, forthcoming), Chapter Two. It owes much to students and colleagues at NTC over the years. Our thanks to Bonnie Perry for permission to publish this version of the paper.*