

Exegetical Brief: Hebrews 10:14

Τοὺς ἁγιαζομένους... Justification Or Sanctification?

Stephen H. Geiger

On the second-to-last Sunday of the church year, we revel in personal eternal victory.

On the Sunday previous, we reflect on the reality of final judgment. The sober tone shows a sinful flesh shuddering, weak and helpless. We find comfort in Jesus, who has experienced judgment in our place. On the Sunday following, we witness the ongoing work of a victorious Savior. He rules over all as king of the universe, guiding present and eternal history for the good of his children.

In between lies Saints Triumphant. On this Sunday we steal a glimpse through the gates of Paradise. What do we see? We see that "those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever" (Daniel 12:3). What do we see? "All who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live" (John 5:28-29).

But how can there be any who are good? How can there be such a thing as a saint triumphant?

On Saints Triumphant Sunday we consider as well the source of our personal, certain victory. We take on those spiritual enemies which attempt to undermine our certainty of victory. We reassure hearers that there is not a sliver of uncertainty in certain victory.

In Hebrews 10, the Spirit offers word weapons to provide God's people with just such an absolute certainty.

The book of Hebrews demonstrates that one has all he needs when one has Jesus. After showing how Jesus was superior to the angels and to Moses, the writer to the Hebrews focuses on Old Testament worship practices. The priesthood and divinely prescribed sacrifices were key elements in God's spiritual relationship with his Old Testament people. It thus would be important, should one wish to demonstrate that Jesus was all one needed, to show that he was superior to these things.

The Spirit focuses first on the person of the Old Testament priest. Jesus was superior to all humans who had served as priests in that he obtained his position on the basis of the power of an indestructible life (Hebrews 7:16). He was also without sin.

The Spirit then makes comparisons to the work of an Old Testament priest. After noting that the perfect blood of Jesus is superior to mere animal blood offered by earthly priests, the writer to the Hebrews considers the frequency of sacrifice. Priests made sacrifices day after day after day, yet never could these sacrifices of themselves succeed in bringing lasting peace to people. If such sacrifices had such power, "would they not have stopped being offered?" (Hebrews 10:2) The sacrifice of Jesus was superior. "But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool" (Hebrews 10:12-13).

The Spirit continues, *μᾶ γὰρ προσφορᾷ τετελείωκεν εἰς τὸ διηνεκὲς τοὺς ἁγιαζομένους* (Hebrews 10:14). Literally, "for by means of one sacrifice he has brought to a state of completion for all time those who are being set apart."

Old Testament priests needed to stand up and walk and carry sacrifices forward day after day. Jesus is pictured, in certain respects, as sitting and waiting. How can a priest sit and wait? He can sit and calmly wait because (*γὰρ*) his sacrifice accomplished something permanent. His sacrifice brought to a state of completion a certain group of people, *τοὺς ἁγιαζομένους*.

To what does *τοὺς ἁγιαζομένους* refer?

The NIV translates this verse, "Because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." This might lead one to wonder, "How can it be true that at the same time we both have been made perfect and are being made holy? The solution may necessarily seem to be, "Well, 'have been made perfect' must refer to justification and 'being made holy' [*τοὺς ἁγιαζομένους*] must refer to the ongoing process of sanctification."

But is the writer to the Hebrews saying that? Is he saying, "By one sacrifice Jesus brought to a state of completion those who are in the process of growing in their Christian faith and life"?

When translating ἀγιάζω, we start with the definition "to set apart." In New Testament usage, this verb can refer to that setting apart by the Spirit which occurs post-conversion. In 2 Timothy 2:21, Paul writes, "If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy [ἡγιασμένον—perfect passive participle], useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work." Speaking of the need to remove oneself from the danger of false teachings, the Spirit is addressing believers and is speaking about a future benefit for obedient believers, that they will be further set apart [ἡγιασμένον] from evil in this life.

It is this use of ἀγιάζω that we most often refer to with our use of the English term "sanctification." We see sanctification as that process of ongoing spiritual growth that follows our subjective justification, our conversion.

It may be interesting to note that the New Testament Greek verb "to set apart," or "to sanctify," refers not only to that ongoing growth in Christian living, but also to the one-time status change that occurs at conversion. As ones who are declared innocent through Christ's saving work, we have the status of being "set apart" from what we once were, dead in transgressions and sins. In other words, the Greek verb "to sanctify" often lies closer to our common usage of the word "justification" than it does to our common usage of the word "sanctification."

This is not to suggest that our use of the terms is inaccurate and unbiblical. It may be helpful to see, however, the flexibility that ἀγιάζω permits.

Consider 1 Corinthians 1:2. Literally translated, Paul writes, "To the church of God in Corinth, to those having been sanctified in Christ Jesus, to those called holy" [τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ οὐσῇ ἐν Κορίνθῳ, ἡγιασμένοις ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, κλητοῖς ἁγίοις]. Notice that the three phrases refer not to three separate groups, but they are appositional and in essence synonymous. Those who have been sanctified [ἡγιασμένοις] are also properly described as "called holy" [κλητοῖς ἁγίοις]. "Sanctified" here refers not to the process of growth in faith that follows conversion, but to the status of having been "set apart" from all that is sin, having been declared holy through the blood of Christ. (See also Acts 20:32, Acts 26:18.)

Consider Ephesians 5:25-26. "...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word" [Χριστὸς ἡγάπησεν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς, ἵνα αὐτὴν ἀγιάσῃ καθαρίσας τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος ἐν ῥήματι]. Christ's desire in giving up his life was to change the status of human beings. He wanted to set them apart as something different. This he accomplished by cleansing them of sin through the washing of water in the word. Notice how the thought here is not of a process but of a fact. This is sanctification in the sense of past saving action accomplished by the power of the means of grace. (See also 1 Corinthians 6:11.)

The writer to the Hebrews makes regular use of this sense of ἀγιάζω. Hebrews 10:10 states, "And by that will we have been made holy [ἡγιασμένοι ἐσμέν, lit. we are in the continuing state of having been set apart] through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." Hebrews 13:12 says, "And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood [ἵνα ἀγιάσῃ διὰ τοῦ ἰδίου αἵματος τὸν λαόν]. Hebrews 10:29 provides a final example: "...who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him" [τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης κοινὸν ἡγησάμενος ἐν ᾧ ἡγιάσθη]. Notice here the aorist tense of ἀγιάζω. In referring to the once "set apart" nature of this now unbeliever, the Spirit speaks of a factual and complete event in the past, the fact that this person had been set apart. If reference was being made to the ongoing process of sanctification which had been a part of that person's past, that growth in Christian faith and life which occurs when and after one has been set apart as a child of God, one would have expected an imperfect tense.

The fact that this most common use of ἀγιάζω is used contextually would offer substantial weight toward taking ἀγιάζω in a similar way in Hebrews 10:14. One might also note that to introduce a sanctification bent at this point in the chapter would be a bit jarring. Hebrews 10:19 offers a fine summary of what the Spirit is discussing in verses 11-18: "Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus..." The context that surrounds verse 14 intends to emphasize that we can be absolutely certain that our sin has been

completely taken away. The emphasis is justification. Sanctification, as we commonly use the term, does not come until verse 22 and those verses which follow ("let us draw near to God...let us hold unswervingly to the hope...let us consider how we may spur...let us not give up meeting").

Ἀγιάζω, then, would refer to the status or condition of converted people, the fact that they have been set apart by God from their former state. They are no longer a part of those who live as guilty ones in God's sight but rejoice in God's universal declaration of innocence. "For by means of one sacrifice he has brought to a state of completion for all time those who are being set apart [τοὺς ἀγιαζομένους]."

Consider now the present tense of the participle τοὺς ἀγιαζομένους. If there is anything that might incline an interpreter toward taking this as sanctification in the commonly used sense, it might be the assumption that the present tense of this participle must communicate ongoing action and so describe a process occurring over time.

The present tense certainly communicates ongoing action. However, the "ongoing" status of the present tense can refer either to a process as it is occurring or to the repeated nature of a one-time event. Consider the Greek verb for run, τρέχω. οἱ τρέχοντες, "those running," can be used in at least two different senses. For example, one might say, "Those who are running [οἱ τρέχοντες] are getting tired." Here the action is pictured as happening at the very moment when the sentence is spoken. The action is ongoing, with the speaker considering every step that the runners are taking in the process of getting tired. One might also say, "Those who run [οἱ τρέχοντες] get tired." Here the speaker may be imagining all the individual occasions when people run instead of walk. Surely the running itself occurs over time and in that sense is continuous, but the speaker's perspective takes that broad action and reduces it to a single one-time concept. He is saying, in effect, "In every individual occurrence of running, the runner gets tired."

Look at the present tense of τοὺς ἀγιαζομένους in this way. There are many specific occasions when individuals are set apart from their earlier state, or converted. By one sacrifice Jesus has brought to a state of completion every single one of those who is set apart as perfect. For similar use of a present participle, see Acts 2:47—αἰνοῦντες τὸν θεὸν καὶ ἔχοντες χάριν πρὸς ὅλον τὸν λαόν. ὁ δὲ κύριος προσετίθει τοὺς σφωζομένους καθ' ἡμέραν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό.

If τοὺς ἀγιαζομένους, then, refers to the many individual occurrences—past and present and future—of people being set apart from their earlier unbelieving state to be connected with God's declaration of innocence through conversion, this may suggest redundancy with the earlier part of the verse. Isn't it mindless duplication to say that Jesus has made perfect those who are set apart as perfect?

The base meaning of τελειόω offers a meaningful alternative. In Hebrews 2:10 the NIV translates, "It was fitting that God ... should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering" [ἔπρεπεν γὰρ αὐτῷ... τὸν ἀρχηγὸν τῆς σωτηρίας αὐτῶν διὰ παθημάτων τελειῶμαι]. Jesus was not guilty of sin. The Father did not declare that Jesus had taken on a new morally perfect status through his sufferings. Rather, the Father brought Jesus, in respect to his work as our Savior, to a state of completion through suffering.

Jesus has also brought us to a state of completion. "For by one sacrifice he has brought to a state of completion for all time those who are set apart as perfect."

This is not redundant. Rather, it is emphatic. The Spirit in Hebrews 10 wishes to demonstrate to a troubled sinner that to have forgiveness in Jesus is to have all that you need. In verse 14 he makes clear that those who are set apart as perfect have been made complete, having all that they need. If one has any question as to whether being forgiven through Jesus is enough, the Spirit says, "Jesus has brought you to a state of completion." What more can be said? "I may be perfect in God's sight, but surely my salvation must depend to some degree on completely overcoming each of my sinful attitudes?" No. What God has done for you has brought you to a position of completion. "But while I may be set apart and perfect in God's sight, I still feel, when old sins come back to haunt me, like maybe I'm missing something." No. What God has done for you has brought you to a position of completion. "But though I know I have wronged God and though I hear you saying that all is forgiven, it just seems like there can never be peace for me as long as I remain a sinner." No. What God has done for you has brought you to a position of completion.

Here we have the gospel. Here we have perfect peace. In this perfect peace we find certainty. We have

absolute certainty that all is well between us and God because of the one sacrifice of Jesus.

"For by one sacrifice he has brought to a state of completion for all time those who are set apart as perfect."

We saints are triumphant.