

What Is a Saint?

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A “saint” to most people implies someone who has attained moral excellence, if not perfection. In the Roman Catholic frame of reference, a “Saint” is someone who lived long ago and who had allegedly performed some sort of miracle and whose life had an exceptional impact on others. To be given sainthood by the Catholic College of Cardinals is much like the process followed when a great baseball player is posthumously inducted into the Hall of Fame.

Both of the above ideas miss the mark of the word “saint” in the New Testament, however. The word means “separated,” “set apart from common usage to God’s service,” “dedicated.” This is the most common term used by inspired writers to describe Christians, being found 56 times. It is well-defined by our word “sacred” – that which is devoted to God. The term is from the same root as “holy,” “holiness,” “sanctify,” “sanctification,” “hallow,” “hallowed,” and “consecrated.” Thus, in its various forms, this word appears several hundred times in the New Testament, making it a very important concept. A saint is simply one who has been sanctified or made holy. There are two senses in which we are to be sanctified.

One is sanctified (becomes a saint) in the “formal” sense when he is converted. By this is meant that one’s relationship to God is changed from enemy to friend. He was devoted to sin, but now pledges to devote himself to serving Christ. This occurs at the same time one is washed from sin and justified by God (1 Cor. 6:11). The agency by which this is accomplished is the Gospel (John 17:17; Eph. 5:25). It was in this “formal” sense that Paul called the morally and doctrinally corrupt people at Corinth “sanctified” and “saints” (1 Cor. 1:2).

Besides this initial, “formal” sanctification, there must be a perpetual, progressive, practical sanctification. This must be done daily by each disciple. That is, we must live in such a way that we prove that we are dedicated to the Lord. To people already converted and made saints, Paul said, “present your members as servants to righteousness unto sanctification” (Rom. 6:19). Likewise, Peter wrote to sanctified people: “Be ye yourselves also holy (sanctified) in all manner of living” (1 Pet. 1:15). The ideal before us is to be so perpetually and progressively dedicated that we can become completely dedicated to him (1 The. 5:23). There is no message more clearly taught in the gospel than that followers of Christ must act differently from the world because they are different. Without the sanctification that makes us distinct from the world, we will not receive the Heavenly inheritance (Acts 26:18).

[**Note:** I wrote this article for and it was published in the August 9, 1979, edition of *Granbury Gospel*, weekly bulletin of the Church of Christ, Granbury, Texas, of which I was editor.]

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