

Clean and Holy

In the Bible we see words like “clean,” “unclean,” and “holy.” These words are related to each other, as is illustrated below.

Unclean versus **Clean**
Common / Profane versus **Holy**

As we can see, the opposite of unclean is clean. If something is unclean, it is defiled in some way. The bodies of dead animals which had not been killed for meat or sacrifice, for example, were considered unclean in the Bible, and touching such a body would make one unclean as well. Skin diseases made a person unclean. Mold in a house made the building unclean. Something that was unclean could be made clean. Mold could be removed from the house or a person's skin disease could be healed and, with the proper rituals, that which was unclean became clean.

A second set of opposites common/profane versus holy is also found in Scripture. Most of the world was considered to be common or profane. However, from time to time, something was designated to become holy and through rituals, usually involving blood sacrifice, so that which was common could be moved to the realm of holy. Objects in the temple, things like tables and censers, were considered to be holy. The temple itself was declared to be holy, with some places in it considered to be more holy than others.

The placement or location of each person or object was determined by their designation. Unclean objects and unclean people were removed from mainstream society and forced to live away from others. Thus, lepers were forced out of their homes and communities, not only to prevent transmission of their disease but also because that which was unclean was not allowed to defile that which was clean. When Jesus healed the 10 lepers, he not only gave them healing from a terrible disease, but he also made it possible for those lepers to return to their homes and communities. On the opposite end of things only those people and objects which were made holy were allowed to be present in areas which had been designated as holy. Holiness is an attribute of God, and because God's holiness may not be contaminated by that which is common/profane, careful rules were followed to keep that which was common away from holy places. Thus, only the High Priest, who was designated as being holy through elaborate sacrifices, was allowed to enter into the presence of God in the Most Holy Place. Certainly nothing that was unclean or even clean and common could enter into a holy area, for that would be to defile holiness.

The Roman Catholic Church had adopted some of these Old Testament designations and has assigned them to parts of their buildings. A Roman Catholic church building, before it is used for worship, undergoes a ritual by which it is made holy, and certain parts are more holy than others. The altar area, the area at the front of the church, usually separated from the rest of the building by a fence or low wall of some sort, is usually considered off limits for the common person. Thus, in many Roman Catholic church buildings, only those who are so designated may enter into the altar area. All the rest come to the fence/wall, mostly to receive Christ's body and blood during the Mass. Symbolically, Christ comes from the holy place to give himself to the common person. While we do not necessarily agree with Roman Catholic practices, this

symbolism is powerful. When a Roman Catholic church building is no longer needed, it is desacralized (made common) and certain objects are removed, and a ritual is performed so that the entire building can be used for common purposes.

Protestant churches, including ours, do not consider the church building to be holy. Our buildings, while dedicated, are not especially holy although they may function to house holy gatherings (congregations of believers) and holy events (worship services). We do not believe that the church building is intrinsically different from any other building except in purpose and function. Thus, one does not need to enter into a church building and approach the altar to draw near to God. It is faulty theology to say that we are going to God's house (implication, a holy place) on a Sunday morning to worship. It is further erroneous to sing, "We have come into your house to worship you," and it is equally erroneous to use those same words in prayer. The church building is not a sacred place where God lives. Differing from the Old Testament practices, we do not need to offer sacrifices or undergo rituals to be allowed into the church building.

The major change, according to Scripture, is that the house of God is no longer the building; it is the people who God has called to belong to him through Jesus Christ. Essentially, we can't go to the house of God because we are the house of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are the place where God dwells on this earth, and he can do so only because we have not only been made clean but have also been made holy through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is only because of that cleansing and sanctifying (the process of becoming holy) that the Spirit can come into our lives and be among us.

This has implications, of course. As Paul says directly at least twice in 1 Corinthians, we are temples of the Holy Spirit and therefore we are to avoid becoming unclean through sinful activities. By grace alone the Holy Spirit does not remove himself from our lives and from the church when we defile ourselves, but we can imagine that our holy God must find the experience of living in the presence of willful sin to be an unpleasant one. If we take seriously that we are God's house, we will seek to keep sin to a minimum and always ask forgiveness when we fail. By God's grace, we have been made clean from the defilement of sin and qualified to live in God's holy presence through sacrifice of Jesus Christ. By his grace, we become the house of God, the dwelling place of God here on this earth. We are cleaned up and made holy through Jesus so that the Holy Spirit may dwell in us and among us. Let's work hard at becoming what we have been made in Christ Jesus, a holy people who are the temple/house of God.

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