



The Priesthood

When Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Roman cathedral, it was only the beginning of what we know today as the “Reformation.” His burden was to expose the error of the Church and turn her back to God. But what he saw and what he wrote were by no means a comprehensive list of how far Romanism had strayed from the Truth.

In those days much Divine revelation had been lost. Many elementary things which are taken so much for granted in our generation (such as salvation by faith) were unknown. So God used our brother to address a few of these deficiencies and recover some invaluable things. As the centuries have passed since then, God has continued to work through many others of His people to restore revelation to His body.

Such items as the use and function of the spiritual gifts, true spiritual worship, sanctification, baptism – just to mention a few – are now considered by much of the Church to be common knowledge. Ever since Luther’s time, there has been an ongoing enlargement and unveiling of God’s truth to His people.

This process has not stopped. We, the church, have not yet arrived and will not until Christ comes in His glory. Therefore, if we desire to be in the forefront of God’s activities, we must be willing to receive and act upon what He is revealing right now, today.

The following thoughts represent a portion of what I believe God is desiring to restore in these days. They are not actually what might be considered “new.” Nor are they my own independent revelations. These are things which have been un-

derstood by many sincere Christians for at least a century. However, as we will see, the natural tendency of fallen man makes these truths particularly difficult to practice and maintain.

From the very beginning of time, God's desires for man have been the same. He continually yearns to walk in intimacy and sweet fellowship with us. This was His purpose in creating Adam, His intention in calling the children of Israel to Himself and even His thought for the church today.

This loving desire of His applies not only to the general body of His people but to each one of us individually. God's longing is to establish an intimate relationship with us which will change our character and nature to be like His.

At first God worked only with individuals such as Noah, Seth and Enoch. Later on we are introduced to the idea of "God's people" when we read about Moses and the children of Israel in the wilderness. But even here God was not seeking just a general mass of religious adherents. Instead He greatly desired to have a personal, intimate relationship with each one of them.

Quite early on, about three months after they had left Egypt, God spoke to Moses concerning the Israelites. Here He revealed His original and highest intention for them. He said: they "...shall be to Me a kingdom of priests" (Ex 19:6).

This statement demonstrates what kind of relationship God was interested in having with each one of them. He envisioned an intimacy which would qualify them to stand in His presence and execute priestly duties. These would include such tasks as ministering to Him in worship and intercession and then ministering to others from what flowed out from His presence during those times.

It was not His plan for them simply to know about Him and go through some religious motions periodically. Our God greatly yearned for His people to know Him and relate to Him personally and intimately.

But as you already know, the children of Israel failed to enter into such a relationship with their God. When He began to draw near to them and reveal His holiness on Mount Sinai, they shrank back from Him and pushed Moses forward saying: "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we

die” (Ex 20:19). “So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was” (Ex 20:21).

The hearts of these people were not right with God and so when He began to speak to them, they could not bear it. Right at that moment they forsook the high calling which God Almighty had given to them and were content to let someone else relate to God on their behalf.

Instead of repenting after hearing the words describing God’s righteousness and allowing Him to cleanse them, they instead chose to put more distance between themselves and God and interpose a mediator who would bear the responsibility on their behalf.

This defection from God’s ideal bore fruit soon afterward. While Moses spent time in the presence of God, the people were enticed by their own lusts. Their personal relationship with their Creator was so limited that they were soon doubting even His existence and His ability to fulfill His promises to them.

Their solution was to create for themselves a god which was impersonal, unholy and easily manipulated – one which did not frighten them and whose presence did not demand something which they themselves could not do. At this point God very nearly gave up on them entirely and they became disqualified from fulfilling God’s original intention (Ex 32:9,10).

Perhaps it was because the hearts of the people in general did not respond to Him that God then appointed a special group of priests. It may be that the tribe of Levi was chosen because they were willing to hear God, at least in some measure, and execute His judgments (Ex 32:28).

So we see that with the appointment of a select priesthood to draw near to God for the people, the general assembly lost their privilege of becoming all that their Maker wanted them to be. The Levitical priesthood became for the people a sort of barrier or buffer zone which served to make God seem more remote and them feel more comfortable.

A similar picture becomes clear when we read the book of I Samuel. At that time the children of Israel had no king. God’s thought was that they would be

unique among the people of the earth – a people governed exclusively by their powerful, unseen God.

However, the people chafed at this idea. To fulfill such a design required that they each establish a relationship with Him, learning to trust and follow Him. This was not easy, especially for the natural man. So these people once again rejected God's intentions and insisted on an earthly king.

They longed for a tangible leader – someone human they could see, someone who would bear the leadership responsibility for them, someone who could be interposed between them and God. Samuel was completely against such a proposal, but God comforted him by saying: “They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them” (I Sam 8:7).

This then brings us to our present situation. Not surprisingly, there are great similarities between Christians and the Old Testament people of God. Church history informs us that not long after the departure of the early apostles, the leaders of the church began to attain an ever-increasing prominence.

Bishops began extending their authority over more than one city and eventually to whole regions. More and more emphasis was placed upon religious “positions” and the necessity of submission to those in these positions. Over the centuries, this process continued until it reached full bloom in Roman Catholicism.

Soon the scriptures were taken completely out of the hands of the people and this “intermediary” tendency we have been discussing found its ultimate expression. Such a progression should not surprise us. It is a natural, human one. In fact, unless a concerted effort is made to the contrary, all Christian movements seem to drift in this direction.

Today, although Protestantism has made some progress away from the bondage, darkness and idolatry found in the Roman system, it unfortunately still retains much of its error. While the scriptures teach the priesthood of all believers (I Pet 2:5,9), the practice of much of modern Christianity denies it.

Most of what we see today in the churches is simply the ministry of one, or perhaps a few selected individuals while the majority remain passive observers (Jer

5:31). I trust that this point does not need voluminous proof but should be evident to even the most casual observer.

(By the way, if this description does not match your church experience, I rejoice with you and hope that you are enjoying all the resultant benefits).

Of course the present leadership situation among Christian assemblies is not labeled as a “priesthood.” That would be blatantly unscriptural. Instead we have such titles as “pastor,” “reverend” or “minister.” But the function of these people is usually almost an exact parallel to the work of the priest in the Old Testament. They are the ones who “hear from God,” do most of the teaching, counseling, organizing, etc. It is sad but true that in many situations the “preacher” is required to do almost everything.

Now since this is the well-established practice among believers today and seems almost universally accepted, many may wonder what is wrong with it. This is a most important consideration. In order to understand the answer, I believe that we must have a genuine concern for the interests and intentions of God.

If man were the only partisan in this situation, perhaps our discussion would not need to be so serious. But here we are attempting to understand and fulfill God’s requirements and so we must approach our subject with reverence and fear.

Not only this, but it should be clear that His objectives are also for our own good and in our best interest. In fact, the more we see of God’s designs, the more we will realize that His directives and requirements are not merely for His own convenience but for our eternal benefit.

God’s plan for His church is twofold. Firstly, He has instructed us to carry His good news to the ends of the earth. Secondly, He intends that we would be transformed into His image.

Now if we are to powerfully and thoroughly carry out these instructions and achieve these ends, we must be people who are intimate with God! Each one of us must enter into and maintain a close, personal relationship with our Creator. We are all required to become priests. Then from this relationship will spring the priestly ministry which will accomplish God’s designs.

We should not be looking to leaders or gifted individuals to get the job done. We must not rely upon international organizations and dynamic campaigns. All of us bear a part of this responsibility. The truth is that if we are not actively engaged in ministering to others, either through gospel preaching, or the exercise of other of our spiritual talents, we have fallen into error.

WE ARE ALL MINISTERS

God requires every one of His people to be employed in His work. We are all ministers. We have all been called and ordained by God to do a work of priestly service until He comes (Jn 15:16).

When Jesus Christ ascended to His Father, He gave gifts to His church. These “talents” or spiritual gifts were not given only to a select few but to all (I Cor 12:7). Every function of every part is vital, just as it is with the different organs and members of our physical body.

If even a seemingly small or insignificant part is not working properly, the whole suffers. This is very true in the church today. When only the especially gifted, talented or “trained” individuals do all the work, there is great loss to the body of Christ and also to God.

I sincerely pray that every reader will take this truth to heart. It does not matter what you think of yourself or of your spiritual abilities. Neither is it important how you compare to others. Even those with only one small talent are and will be required by God to use it to its fullest extent (Mt 25: 14-30).

If we are cowed by comparing ourselves with others or are fearful and do nothing, we will have to answer to our Creator one day. It is both our privilege and our awesome responsibility before God to discover what work He has called us to do and begin learning by His Spirit to exercise ourselves toward this end.

Without such ministry, we will not grow properly. Oh, we may make some spiritual progress – especially in the beginning – but to really grow to maturity, we must begin ministering ourselves. As we give, more will be given to us.

This is a spiritual law. If we are merely receivers – week after week listening to others who have spent time in the presence of God – our knowledge may increase but our lives will not be changed.

This is the unfortunate state of much of the church today. We have our “superstars” who are perhaps well known and are busy day and night, but we also have the “passive majority” who rely on others to do the work.

The detrimental effects of this situation may not be readily apparent, especially in a well-oiled organization, but they are there nonetheless. Many Christian meetings are populated by spiritual babies who are overfed and under-worked. They come week after week to receive and imagine that because they hear good teaching they are right with God.

But far too often, these individuals still have hidden sins or serious flaws in their character. Frequently, it is when we attempt to serve others, that these things are exposed. As we begin to minister we realize how our own life needs changing and this stimulates us to seek the Lord for deliverance. If we are truly to press on into spiritual maturity, it is essential that we become priests – priests who are actively carrying out their duties in the house of God.

Not only is spiritual ministry necessary for our own growth, it is also important for the progress of others. Regardless of your spiritual abilities or function in the body, there are others who need what you have.

It doesn't matter if yours is a small piece or a large one. It is absolutely necessary. Somewhere among the believers you know or in the world around you, there are people to whom your portion is important.

For example, your neighbors may be perishing without Christ as a result of your fear or unwillingness to speak to them. Or perhaps your Christian acquaintances may be seeking the very piece of understanding which you possess. Possibly many that you know are suffering because you have not taken time to pray for their deliverance or paid attention to their need. (It is always much easier to criticize or gossip than to pray or help, isn't it?).

You see, your portion is essential for the growth and spiritual well-being of others. God has given it to you for their sake and therefore it is important to exercise it. In His wisdom, our Father has constructed the church so that each member is dependent on the rest. Therefore, for “all to arrive” at maturity (Eph 4:13), the ministry of each part is indispensable.

SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

At this point some may ask, “Where do spiritual leaders fit into all this?” Leadership is both scriptural and necessary for a healthy church situation. However, it is also commonly misunderstood. The role of a leader is to lead. This does not involve dominating or controlling others but instead means to “get out in front” spiritually and go! Others will notice and follow.

The word "rule" found in I Tim 5:17 and Heb 13:7,17,24 of the King James version has perhaps been the source of much misunderstanding. This word is PROISTEMI in Greek and should be translated “to stand before” or “to lead.”

The burden of a true leader is not to “run the church,” but to assist all the rest in fulfilling their ministry – growing into all that God is calling them to be. You can easily recognize such genuine leaders because they will always be putting the best interest and spiritual progress of the rest ahead of their own. (See Lk 22:25,26.)

Leaders who are simply feeding themselves (building up their own ministry, feathering their own financial nest, etc.) and consequently keeping those in their care passive, will come under the judgment of God. Those who elevate themselves and keep others down for the sake of their own security, authority or other considerations are in an extremely precarious situation (Jas 3:1).

Leadership must be that which is raised up by God. If it is only the product of education, appointment to a position, or personal ambition, it is certain to be a hindrance to real spiritual progress. Human, religious organization can also be a limitation to fulfilling the desires of God. Getting the job done or keeping people active does not translate to spiritual maturity.

In fact, even unbelievers can organize effectively. The task at hand is not to have huge buildings, “successful” ministries or great numbers in attendance. All these things can be achieved without ever fulfilling the Father’s will.

In His plan, programs are replaced with true spiritual ministries which He has raised up in our midst. Future plans are a result of His guidance and organizational or positional authority is replaced with true spiritual authority.

When we are going God’s way, people are not just slotted into some job which needs doing. (For example we need Sunday school teachers or ushers so we ask for volunteers.) Instead the ministries of each person are discovered and then they are encouraged along these lines.

Now if the Christian meetings which you attend would fall apart completely if things were done in this way then I feel compelled as your friend and brother to inform you that it is not a truly spiritual work. It can only be a human organization which is not really accomplishing the purposes of God but only conforming to the standards of present-day Christianity.

It may be that you are meeting with a group of believers where you have no encouragement or opportunity to grow into your ministry. Perhaps your experience is just that of a “one man show” or something so organized that the life has gone out of it.

Your talent may have been neglected, misused, ridiculed or discouraged. Yet, none of this is an acceptable excuse for doing nothing. When you appear before your King, there will be no one else to blame for not fulfilling your priestly duties.

Since God has equipped and called you, He will also make a way for you to begin serving. For example, you can pray anywhere at any time. You can give to others without any official sanction. You can teach and counsel from house to house if necessary.

When you actually begin functioning in the ministry into which God has called you, the doors will open before you and people will recognize the hand of God in your life. Things will probably start slowly at first and may seem small or insignifi-

cant (Zech 4:10). But as you faithfully and diligently exercise your God-given talents, they will grow and you will grow spiritually also.

God's will is for us to be to Him a kingdom of priests. We are all His prophets (I Cor 14:1,31). Each and every one of us has a ministry to fulfill and spiritual duties to perform which no one else can do quite in the same way we can.

When we appear before Him we will be called upon to give an account of our works (Rev 2:23). There what we have done will testify to our true spiritual condition. We will not be able to say that we did not see the needs or that we were not qualified (Mt 25:31-46). The same God who worked mightily in the apostles and prophets also lives in every one of His children. He is able to do far more than we ask or think if only we are obedient to Him.

I beg each and every one of you to take these thoughts seriously. Consider your own life and see if you are really an active laborer for your King or just a passive observer. Have you put a "safe" distance between yourself and God and allowed others to bear what should have been your responsibility? Have you shrunk back through fear or human inability and let others do the work?

If so, take a moment right now and repent before Him. Give your whole life to God anew. Tell Him that from this moment on, you are completely willing to be a vessel for His service. Then, as He leads you, obediently work together with Him in His vineyard.

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