

Last week we began looking at the biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers. We are a kingdom of priests, according to Revelation 1:6. But in order to understand what that means, we have to set aside our presumptions about leadership and adopt what Jesus teaches about leadership. The reality is that we take ideas about leadership from the business world and from the political world and without really thinking about it apply them to the church, but doing so harms the church. Last week we looked at two models of leadership-positional and functional, and discovered that Jesus does not want his followers to hold positions or have authority over each other. He is the authority. Jesus only wants them to do the things he asks them to do. His ideas about leadership form a functional model, not a positional model.

Last week I began by sharing a couple quotes with you. Here's a third quote from another author- a man who God used to help churches in China.

The clerical system of church management is exceedingly popular, but the whole thought is foreign to Scripture. In a church all the members are active. He [God] appointed some to take oversight of the work so that it might be carried on efficiently. It was never His thought that the majority of the believers should devote themselves exclusively to secular affairs and leave church matters to a group of spiritual specialists. —Watchman Nee

We're going to start in the OT today. When we look back at the priests in the OT, we see what appear to be spiritual specialists: individuals who hold a religious office and perform special duties that are reserved for persons who hold that office. But was that really God's plan for the priests, or for people of Israel? Take a look at Isaiah 61:6. *Isa 61:6 but you shall be called the priests of the LORD; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God; you shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their glory you shall boast.*

When you read the verses ahead of this, you quickly discover that God is not talking to the priests. He is talking to the whole nation. God is envisioning a time when every Israelite will be considered a priest of the Lord, and so Israel would be a nation of priests. And this change is related to the prosperity of Israel. Therefore, God's vision for his people is not to have a class of spiritual specialists. He wants every person to be a priest. Plenty of other people in the OT made pleasing sacrifices to God, not just the priests. In God's dream for his people, every person ministers directly to him and every person ministers directly to every other person. God would bless his people with prosperity if they would catch that vision and live it.

If you want further evidence, take a look at Jeremiah 5.

Jer 5:30 An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land:

Jer 5:31 the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?

In Israel, prophets were honored. If prophets were prophesying, it made the people feel like God was with them. If the prophets were truly speaking things that God had inspired, then God was actually with them. But many times the prophets said things that God had not inspired. It's not that they were necessarily saying false things about God, they weren't necessarily false prophets, they were just filling the air with words because that's what the people came to expect from them. If the prophets didn't do that, they lost their social status. And so they actually established schools so that prophets could learn to prophesy. Now, sure, it would seem like a good idea to offer some theological training to people that seemed to have a prophetic gifting. But at the same time that only served to reinforce the existence of a social category that God never created. That's why God says that this is such an appalling and horrible thing. God raised up prophets to speak when God had something to say to his people, not to fill some sort of office or social category. It was supposed to be functional leadership, not positional leadership.

And that goes for the priests too. God says through Jeremiah that the priests are ruling at their direction, and this is also an appalling and horrible thing. Now that doesn't mean they were necessarily ruling in bad ways. Many of them were probably ruling in ways that seemed good to a lot of the people. And then over time the people came to expect that the priests would rule- that they would offer wise leadership and administration in the religious sphere of Israel. Now I'm sure that some of them ruled in bad ways too because that's human nature. But the point is that the priests were not really supposed to be spiritual rulers. They were not intended to fill an official leadership position the way we think of it. What they were called to do was to help people make sacrifices and offerings for sin and guilt and peace. Those sacrifices and offerings were the spiritual bread and butter of Israel- that's what brought them close to God by reminding them of his love and grace and deliverance. But the priests got off-track because they gave in to people's desire to follow spiritual strategists. They wanted special ordained leaders to provide the silver bullets that would solve their religious or spiritual issues.

We have that same desire today in the church. We want people in official leadership positions who are spiritual specialists to reveal mysteries and unlock secrets.

We have a translation issue that plays into these misconceptions on our part as modern readers.

Deu_17:9 And you shall come to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision.

In these verses, the ESV uses the phrase "who is in office" to refer to the priests and judges that are around at the time. Deuteronomy 19:17 and 26:3 use the same phraseology. But in the original Hebrew of those verses, there is no word there that can be translated as "in office". That phrase was added by the English translators to make it read a little smoother and use modern terms. But unfortunately, that terminology supports a connotation of the priesthood that is not

biblically accurate and a model of leadership that is not biblically accurate. Priests were not called to fill an office but to fulfill a function. That function was to make sacrifices, know the law of God, and in some cases to judge disputes. It's functional leadership, not positional leadership.

The only actual office or official position of priest that exists in heaven and earth is that of Jesus Christ. He is our great high priest.

So we see how having a class or group of people who are considered the religious specialists or professionals is not part of God's plan. Further biblical evidence shows that having certain people who are considered the specialists of leadership and administration is not part of God's plan either. Take a look at Hosea 8:4.

Hos 8:4 They made kings, but not through me. They set up princes, but I knew it not.

1 Samuel 8 tells us how Israel got started with a king. We will look at that story another time. But what God said in 1 Samuel 8 is the same thing he said through Hosea. What God is saying is that it was not his will or plan for the Israelites to ever have a king or any kind of royalty. God never preordained any system of political leadership. That was the people's idea. They were the ones that wanted a king like the other nations. God allowed it but did not desire it. God's plan for his people was for him to be their king himself. That's why, back in Exodus and Leviticus, God gave the people his law himself. He didn't set up a king through whom to give laws. God didn't provide any one person whose leadership skills should be credited with the prosperity of the people or blamed for a lack of prosperity. God's desire was to lead his people himself. Israel was originally supposed to be a theocracy, not a monarchy.

We see a similar thing happening in the NT. Contrary to popular thinking, the New Testament letters never speak of church leaders in terms of "offices" and other conventions of human social organization. Whenever the New Testament describes people who are chiefly

responsible for spiritual oversight, it does so by mentioning the work they do. Functional language dominates.

1Ti 3:1 The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

The English translation of this verse suffers from the same plight as the verses in Deuteronomy we looked at. The phrase “the office of” is not translatable from any original Greek word in this verse. If you translate this verse word for word, you would get: *The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to superintendence, he desires a noble task.*

Leadership and oversight are clearly not offices. They are tasks. And they are tasks for which people are gifted by God. We will talk about that more next week when we look at the way the NT talks about elders and overseers.

For today, I want to conclude with Colossians 2:8.

Col 2:8 See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

Paul exhorts the believers in Colossae not to allow any man to spoil them through the philosophies and traditions of this world. Do you believe this includes the ideas and philosophies of the business world and the political world? I absolutely believe it does. And it’s not the things in the world that are obviously bad that take us captive. They are obvious, so we avoid them. No, we are taken captive by things that on the outside look good. We borrow ideas from the world, many times without even realizing that that’s where we got them from. And then we are surprised when we implement them and the outcome is something that is only partially biblical at best and only partially Christlike at best. Think about how Israel wanted a king. God didn’t give them that idea. They got that from the world. And how did that turn out?

The modern church is littered with ideas from the business world. The faces of pastors are on billboards. Churches conduct massive

advertising campaigns. I've heard of churches, and not just big ones, even small churches in small towns, talk about 'branding' their churches. Pastors with specific titles provide strategies that are given the credit for the growth of their churches. Then we try to copy-cat them. Is that what Jesus wants for us?

The truth of scripture is that Jesus wants to speak and act in the world through each one of us. There is no secret knowledge or magical strategy or clever leadership on the part of a select few in the upper echelon of the church that will be the key to making the church what God wants it to be. The only key to making the church what God wants it to be is to do church God's way. And his way is for everyone to be priests.

1Pe 2:5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1Pe 2:9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

God calls us a holy priesthood and a royal priesthood. And as priests, we all offer spiritual sacrifices and make proclamations of God's excellencies. We all are called to take initiative and have an influence. We all are given the privilege of a holy calling. We are all set apart for a special purpose. We all have God-given gifts to offer. No one of us is in a position over any other one of us. We are all ordained priests.

Let's pray

Benediction:

Rev 1:5b-6 To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.