

## Chosen to minister

Lord's Day: 12/03/06 pm

Study Text: Deuteronomy 18:1-8

The people trembled in fear at the sight of the mountain on fire and the sound of the voice of the Lord. They told Moses *you go near and hear all that the Lord our God may say and tell us* (5:27). And so the Lord God made a covenant with his chosen people at Mt. Sinai or Horeb. Under the terms of that covenant the Lord declared how he was to be worshipped. In fact it took forty days for the Lord to give Moses all the details regarding building the sanctuary and setting worship practices in place.

True worship was fundamental to the covenant relationship. The Lord set apart the whole tribe of Levi to attend to worship in Israel (Numbers 3). They were to assist Aaron the priest, himself a Levite, at the altar, and to teach and uphold true worship in Israel.

Are the people of God today as concerned about true worship as they were in the times of Moses? Jesus commands us to worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:24). We see a great emphasis on the spirit in many churches today but is there the same concern for truth in worship?

Israel never ceased to worship the Lord, but when they ceased to adhere to the divine instructions given through Moses their worship was corrupted and became unacceptable to the Lord. They started to offer blind, lame and even stolen animals to the Lord (Malachi 1). Their worship was only outward and not from the heart.

The priests were as much to blame as anyone – indeed more so for they had corrupted the ‘covenant of Levi’. *For the lips of the priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts* (Malachi 2:7). What was the answer to this corrupt worship? It was not to abandon the priesthood but to reform it, to bring the word of the Lord back into the house of the Lord and let all the people hear it. This is what Hezekiah did when he became king. He found that there were too few priests, so their brethren the Levites helped them (II Chronicles 29:34).

Moses has told us about the Levites a number of times already in Deuteronomy so we might think to pass over this reference here in chapter 18. But we must ask why is Moses speaking of the Levites again. Clearly it was a concern to him. ‘Do not forsake the Levite who is within your gates’, ‘do not forsake the Levite’, he kept telling the people as they were about to enter the good land (12:19, 14:27).

## Chosen by God

The Levites and priests were set apart by the Lord as full time ministers under the Old Covenant. This tribe was chosen *out of all the tribes to stand and minister in the name of the Lord* forever (18:5). As such they were given no land inheritance in Israel. They had no means of livelihood apart from the tithes and offerings which the Lord commanded the people to regularly give.

The Levites were to live in 48 cities throughout the land. They had a little pasture land around these cities. Some would minister at the central place of worship. Many who had the task of transporting the tabernacle in the wilderness would now have other tasks. They would still assist the priests at the altar and in teaching.

Given that the tribes were somewhat similar in size, one in every twelve men in Israel was set apart for ministry. Many today despise full time ministry. Many churches think they can function without a full time minister. ‘Why do we need a minister? Any fool can get up and preach’ they say. ‘It is talented musicians and singers we need. We need good managers and businessmen’. Remember one of the twelve tribes of Israel, *all the tribe of Levi* (18:1), was set apart by the Lord to minister in his name.

*To stand to minister.* This is an interesting expression. To stand of course means to be ready – ready to go, ready to do what the Lord tells. In India Government officers have ‘peons’ – men who stand by their desk or their office door ready to take a message whenever and wherever the officer tells them. This man does not sit down on the job. He does not choose where he goes. He does not write the message. He simply delivers the message given to him by his boss.

The Levite was chosen by God to stand and minister in the name of the Lord. All ministers need to remember this today. They are chosen by God to serve him. The apostle Peter and the apostle Paul called themselves bondservants. Jesus himself said he came to serve, not to be served.

## Personal Desire

If the Levite goes from the city where he lives up to the central place of worship and desires to serve the Lord at this place, Moses said he was allowed to do so – and receive an equal portion to eat (18:8). What is this instruction all about? ‘An important principal is stated here’ writes one scholar. ‘The rights of all Levites are guaranteed against any possible restrictions imposed by vested interests at the central sanctuary’. Apart from the family of Aaron that was set apart as priests, there was no hierarchy among the Levites. There was to be no clique of special Levites who controlled things at the central sanctuary. There was no hereditary succession – all Levites were equal.

What might this principle hold for us today? The dangers of nepotism are not confined to politics – they can be found within the church. In independent churches it is not uncommon to see the son taking over the ministry from his father. Our church practice of a congregation calling a minister who they think will be suitable, together with presbytery approval, guards against such nepotism. But still we might ask ‘why is it that some men are considered more suitable than others?’ Moses said the Levite *may serve in the name of the Lord his God as all his brethren the Levites do* (18:7). **All** were chosen by God to minister in his name without favouritism or prejudice.

## Depend On the People

The Levite was chosen by God and given the responsibility to stand and minister in his name. The people also had a responsibility. They were to provide for the needs of the Levite. They were to do this from their tithes and offerings. The Levite had no land so could not produce his own food. He was dependent upon the other tribes according to the command of the Lord.

The priests and Levite were entitled to take meat from the sacrifices made at the altar (*cf.* I Corinthians 9:13). Apart from the burnt offering, the flesh of the animal remained and could be eaten – with certain restrictions. At Shiloh in the time of Samuel we read of how the wicked sons of Eli the priest demanded raw meat with the fat on it so they could roast it. The custom was to boil the meat so there was no fat and to take whatever came out of the pot (I Samuel 2).

The Levite was also entitled to the first-fruits of grain, new wine and oil brought as tithes to the house of the Lord or stored within the gates. And *the first fleece of your sheep you shall give them* (18:4). It was not the leftovers that were to be given to the Levite. The first-fruits were brought, they were offered to the Lord in recognition of his blessings upon the land. And so the Levite ate what the people ate, and wore what the people wore.

For ministers serving in their own culture this situation should be easy – unless a man is greedy and wants more than the people among whom he ministers. We have noted how the sons of Eli were not satisfied with the portion allocated to them. When a minister goes to another culture it can be somewhat difficult. Some who minister among Hindus will not eat meat, and those who work among Muslims or Jews may stop eating pork. Missionaries must be wise in the way they live among poor people – most would seek to live at the same standard as the people among whom they minister.

## Conclusion

Under the New Covenant we have the ‘priesthood of all believers’ – *you are a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God* (I Peter 2). So is there no longer a place for full time ministers, men to teach the word of God and lead in public worship like the Levites? Should we have so called ‘tentmakers’, men who minister in their spare time? Some men prefer such ministry for they are not then dependent on the people. Some will argue that the apostle Paul was a tentmaker and supported himself. This he did at Corinth (Acts 8), but it was not his custom, nor his teaching.

Paul made it very clear to the church at Corinth that he was entitled to full support from them. *Do we have no right to eat and drink? Is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working?* (I Corinthians 9). Paul knew what was written in the Law of Moses. He actually quoted from Deuteronomy – *you shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain*. He referred to the those who serve at the altar (the Levites) who partake of the offerings of the altar (I Corinthians 9:13).

A growing church will always be a giving church. Let us do as Paul tells us – give yourself first to the Lord (II Corinthians 8:5). If we comprehend something of the greatness of the kingdom of God then we will do all we can to extend his kingdom and his glory. We will freely give ourselves and all we have to the Lord and to the ministry of the Word of God.

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