RESPONSIBILITY FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

COMPARING THE LEADERSHIP OF OLD TESTAMENT

PRIESTS WITH NEW TESTAMENT CLERGY

The famous and powerful preacher, Charles Finney, once stated: “**Brethren, our preaching will bear its legitimate fruits. If immorality prevails in the land, the fault is ours in a great degree. If there is a decay of conscience, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the public press lacks moral discrimination, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the church is degenerate and worldly, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the world loses its interest in religion, the pulpit is responsible for it. If Satan rules in our halls of legislation, the pulpit is responsible for it. If our politics become so corrupt that the very foundations of our government are ready to fall away, the pulpit is responsible for it**.”

The spiritual leadership of God’s people is an awesome and sacred responsibility that must be taken seriously at all times. The role of the priest, under the Old covenant, was that of a mediator between God and man. He represented man to God by administering sacrifices for sins and worship offerings to God. He also represented God to man by teaching, upholding and enforcing God’s Law and commands in addition to religious instruction, guidance and encouraging trust and obedience in seeking God and dependence on Him.

What happens to the people when the priesthood compromises, loses it sense of purpose or gives in to wrong or selfish motives, or focuses more on ritual practices than on their intended spiritual purposes and principles? The people become spiritually leaderless, and as such, loose their sense of spiritual direction! Leadership is a serious responsibility as mentioned. Prior to the establishment of the Levitical Priesthood under Moses, priests were already in existence and functioning; they were responsible patriarchs of families, tribes or households. The key to such a priestly purpose was the undertaking of responsibility to lead the family and people in God’s ways and knowledge of Him; (as a father is to be as a priest and prophet of his home – responsible for the spiritual nurture of his family). This is how the knowledge of God passed down from Adam to Abraham, by each exercising a priestly role and function for his family.

 Now let’s consider the Biblical history of Israel. Why and how did Israel frequently turn to idolatry, the worship of pagan gods; even to sacrificing their own children to idols of sex and fertility, (today we call it abortion)? The responsibility falls at the feet of the priesthood due to their ineffectiveness. Why? It’s due to insincerity, lack of dedication and consecration, compromise with worldliness and fleshly lusts. They just did not do their job! Many even became corrupt as the high priest Eli’s sons, Phinehas and Hophni, (1 Samuel 4).

Now consider what happened to the priesthood as the people turned to idolatry and pagan worship. The priesthood, being no longer effective and functional, dried up; they were no longer needed and lost their value to the people. The tithes and offerings of the people ceased and dried up also, and since these priest and their families were dependent on those tithes and offerings for their sustenance, they now had to fend for themselves. Thus the priesthood died out and the tabernacle and temple were all but abandoned as idols sprang up in groves of worship throughout the land.

 God and true worship was abandoned. Is it any wonder that God had to deal harshly with Israel on several occasions in order to get them to repent. So who was responsible for Israel’s fall into idolatry and paganism – the priesthood, the responsible spiritual leadership that ceased to lead.

 Is there a parallel between Israel’s priesthood and the clergy of the church as it relates to the state of the church and Christianity today and its influence on our nation? YES!

 The history of God’s chosen people, Israel, has shown they have experienced periods of spiritual decline and falling away from God into apostasy. This was followed by a spiritual awakening to restore their proper worship of God. The church has followed the same path, and researching the cause reveals that both national Israel and the church have parallel experiences for the exact same reasons. The cause for the spiritual decline experienced by both Israel and the church is due to the failure of those tasked with spiritual leadership in directing peoples worship and dependence on God. For Israel the failure is laid at the feet of the priests; for the church the failure is laid at the feet of the pastors, elders, bishops, or whatever title they choose to be recognized by.

 Why or how do those responsible for spiritual leadership allow this decline to occur? This author sees it as the result of “professionalism” of those in the positions of responsibility. Today it is the “professional clergy” that has caused the spiritual decline of the church (in general). By “professional” I am referring to those who earn their living from their profession – the salaried clergy. These professionals are living off of the saints, and to insure that they can maintain their living they will preach, teach and do what the people want rather than what they need. Thus they compromise their purpose and function and the people lose out no longer having leadership that is consecrated and dedicated to God’s Word and ways. Instead, such professional clergy are more dedicated to themselves or their positions.

Many Christians will deny that the church is in a state of decline, however, all they have to do is look at the evidence. The early church “turned the world upside down” for Christ. Today’s church has had so little impact that it is looking more like the world than ever. In fact, instead of the modern day church transforming the world to Christ, the world is transforming the church to look more like the world with its carnal, lustful ways. Further evidence is that Islam is growing faster than Christianity. In fact, in many nations, the churches have closed down and many have been turned into Moslem mosques. Does this not indicate a spiritual decline?

So back to the question of how and why, and what is the failure of the leadership in the church. First, let’s look at the failure of the priests of Israel to see who and why they experienced the loss of their Godly relationship. The following is quoted from the Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia on the topic of Israel’s PRIEST, PRIESTHOOD:

**The success of this priestly religion depended heavily on the meaning and spirit of its operation, especially on the part of the people themselves. Priestly effectiveness, because of its highly representative character, can readily slip into the barren activity of the ritualistic pattern without the meaning and spirit of the ritual. This in turn eliminates any real, personal involvement of the people represented. The ritual becomes rigidly important and the meaning evanesces (vanishes, becomes empty or vain). This very largely became the history of the Hebrew priesthood. In the Old Testament the prophets often lifted up their voices against the departure on the part of the people from God who spoke to them through Moses. By the time of the New Testament a sharp cleavage existed between the Pharisee with his meticulous adherence to the ritual and physical aspects of the Old Testament pattern, as he saw it, and Jesus Christ with His emphasis on the inner meaning and spiritual interpretation of all elements of life**.

 What is revealed here is that the role of priest or spiritual leader became more of a profession than a confession. The function and position with the duties attached to it became paramount for holding the title of priest. As a result of the priests focusing their attention on their professional duties and function, rather than on the spiritual qualities and purpose of the Holy One whom they were to represent, they lost their spiritual bearing and thus any and all spiritual impact on the people. Thus, without proper “spiritual” leadership, the people lost their bearings and drifted into other religions and adopted the pagan practices of those non-Israelites they mingled with.

 The exact same pattern has occurred in the church today. Much of the professional clergy are more interested in their positions and titles as leaders of their respective organizations than they are about the purpose and function of being a spiritual leader by example. Thus the typical Christian in such a church organization is not properly motivated to be conformed to the image of Christ and ceases to be an impacting factor in the lives of those around him. As a result our entire nation is no longer considered by some as a “Christian” nation.

 It is also interesting to note that when a return to Godly worship finally came to the Israelites, it DID NOT come as a result of any effort of a priest. Instead it came from the efforts and burden of one or more persons outside the priesthood. It came from prophets, who were not priests, or even of the priestly tribe of Levi. In addition, it was often a priest who opposed the prophets and persecuted them – as in the case of various priests who resisted the prophet Jeremiah; in particular the priests Pashhur, Hananiah and Shemaiah and their respective dealings with Jeremiah.

 Consider who it was that killed God’s Old Testament prophets; it was either wicked rulers, apostate priests and religious leadership, or a combination of both co-hording to shut up the voices and messages of the true prophets. As Jesus said:

Matt 23:37 – *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!*

Luke 11:47-50 – *Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. In fact, you bear witness that you approve the deeds of your fathers; for they indeed killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore the wisdom of God also said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and persecute,’ that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation*

Likewise, consider who it was that conspired to have Jesus killed, it was the apostate priests and those who held religious leadership and influence in His day. They were also instrumental in persecuting the apostles and believers in the early church; WHY? … because Jesus and His followers were considered by the priests to be a threat to their positions, power, influence and control over the people. They feared that their “professional” priesthood (or clergy-hood) was being threatened.

John 11:47-48 – *Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, “What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.”*

 After the miracle healing of the lame man by Peter and John, these apostate religious leaders, even though they acknowledged a true miracle of healing, wanted to stop the preaching of the gospel.

 Acts 4:1-3, 5-6, 14-18 – *Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, 2being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. …And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem. …And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, “What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name.” So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.*

The apostle Peter defied the priests of the religious establishment and declared that the gospel of Jesus Christ must go forth in truth and in power; all this in spite of threats and intimidation.

Acts 4:19-22 – *But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done. For the man was over forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.*

 Today we have a similar situation in that much of the professional clergy, having become apostate and fallen from being true spiritual ministers of Christ, are more concerned about preserving their positions of leadership and control. They will not allow true servants of God (His prophets and teachers) to bring His message into their congregations.

 However, the Lord is raising up His servants today, just as He brought forth the prophets of old, and He is training and preparing them to go forth with His truth and empowered by His Spirit to finish the work He commissioned. This will be done in spite of the opposition of the apostate leadership in the institutional churches. God is going outside the recognized established church leadership to bring forth His prophets, teachers and preachers because time is short and His Word must go out.

 As has been often said, “History repeats itself”, and it applies to the church as well as to the rest of the world. While the professional clergy continues to engage in their religious traditions and preserving their status, our Lord Jesus Christ is calling forth His servants to carry on the gospel message; a message that must not be confined within the walls of a church building, but must be out where the people are who need to hear and see the evidence of God’s love – Jesus Christ, crucified and risen again to bring the life of God into each who believes, repents and follows God’s plan.

 God’s Word must go forth in the power that it truly is and should not be restrained by the religious traditions and limitations of the professional clergy who resist the power and moving of God in and among His people.

Hebrews 4:12 – *For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*

After enduring the opposition of the priests, Peter and the believers made a prayer of commitment and a request for the power of God to be displayed. This is the type of effort that the professional clergy fear because they cannot control it.

Acts 4:29-31 – *Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.*

It is time for the true church, the Body of Christ, to be seen as the glorious, holy, separated, righteous example of God’s people on earth – as in the “manifestation of the sons of God’ – Romans 8:19.

 The church in decline is the church in apostasy – it is not the Body of Christ. This shows that there are two churches in the world today; the one man is building, which is in decline as a result of showing man’s character and nature; and the one Jesus Christ is building, which represents Him in righteousness and holiness – showing His character and nature. The true church, the Body of Christ is the one He is coming back for:

Ephesians 5: 26-27 – *that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.*

 The true spiritual leadership of His church functions and works - *for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ -* (Ephesians 4:12-13).