

In the Wilderness: God-Centered Worship

Scripture Readings: Numbers 3:1-20, 38-42; 1 Cor 12:27-31

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Dear Congregation of Christ: Have you ever been to a youth camp or an adult retreat where emotions ran high, so the leader and the campers decided to have a spontaneous Lord's Supper? Or maybe there were so-called decisions for Christ, so the youth leader decided to baptize the converts? This is a common state of things today: the sacraments administered by an unordained person in youth camps and adult retreats, especially among parachurches. Self-appointed evangelists, pastors and missionaries are also very common today. What does the Bible say about this? What does the book of Numbers say?

The last two weeks, we considered Numbers Chapters 1 and 2 of the Book of Numbers, which originally was called "In the Wilderness." Chapter 1 consists of a census of all of Israel's males 20-60 years old, according to the twelve tribes. Chapter 2 details how the camp is to be arranged, and how the whole nation is to march towards the Promised Land. Today, we will study Chapter 3, a chapter dealing with Israel's priests and Levites. Who are they? What are their duties?

One of the main themes of Numbers is worship acceptable and pleasing to God by his people dwelling in the wilderness. We learned in Chapter 2 that the tabernacle, where God dwells, is the center of the camp—i.e., God is the center of their worship and life. Chapter 3 gives us details on the qualifications of Israel's God-appointed priests and Levites and the duties God assigned to them. It also shows us how the people are redeemed by God so they can worship God acceptably. All of these were commanded by God, *"Thus did the people of Israel; they did according to all that the Lord commanded Moses"* (Num 1:54; 2:34; 3:51).

This is God-centered worship, doctrine and life! Our theme today then is, **IN THE WILDERNESS: GOD-CENTERED WORSHIP**, under three headings: first, **God-Appointed Officers**; second, **God-Assigned Duties**; and third, **God-Redeemed People**.

God-Appointed Officers

Our text tells us that only Aaron's descendants could be priests, the only people who could enter the tabernacle. Only descendants of Levi could be assigned tabernacle duties. The importance of the duties assigned the Levites did not depend on position in family—whether older or younger—not even good works or sin. The Levites consisted of the clans of Kohath, Gershon and Merari, the sons of Levi. The duties assigned each clan was God's prerogative and sovereign will.

Moreover, only those whom God had chosen and appointed could serve as priests; dire consequences follow anyone else who tried to do priestly duties without authority from God. King Saul lost his kingdom (1 Sam 13:8-15); Uzzah, one of King David's men, was struck dead by God (2 Sam 6:5-11); and King Uzziah became a leper for the rest of his life (2 Chr 26:16-21). Death

followed Nadab and Abihu, the two sons of Aaron, when they used unauthorized fire in the tabernacle (Lev 10:1-2). The position of priest was sacred, serious business!

What does this tell us about today's self-made pastors who have not been called and appointed by God? Like the Old Testament priests, prophets and kings, officebearers in the church must be called, set apart, taught, and appointed by God. They are not to be chosen by a popularity vote of the congregation. Not only did God institute these offices, he also established the qualifications of church officers in 1 Tim 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9. It does not matter if you are rich or smart, or if you have leadership skills, or which family you come from. These are the world's standards of success, not God's standard for those whom he would call and appoint as men of God. According to this standard, the officebearers' knowledge of and loyalty to Scriptures, his theological and ministerial knowledge and ability, and his spiritual life must be unassailable.

Furthermore, only men are to serve in these offices. Many churches today ordain women as pastors, elders or deacons, but God has commanded in Scripture that only men are to be ordained to serve as officebearers. We are to do only "*according to all that the Lord commanded*" us. How then can women serve in the church? They have special roles in teaching other women and children so "*that the word of God may not be reviled.*" They can also serve in other unordained capacities (Tit 2:3-5). Their role in the church is so crucial that, if they discharged their teaching duties faithfully, God's name is not slandered. Our children's behavior and speech, both in our families and church, reflect whether the mothers and other women in the church are doing their teaching duties faithfully.

In addition to disobeying God's strict requirements regarding the calling, qualifying and ordination of officebearers in the church, there are two other practical reasons for not allowing self-appointed pastors to shepherd the flock of God. When pastors are self-appointed, there is no accountability, which can lead to errors and misbehavior. And, as the human heart is prone to hunger for power, it is also common in many large denominations for men and women to seek positions of power and influence through political maneuvering.

So we see in Chapter 3 of Numbers how God called, appointed and ordained Levitical priests in the Old Testament. We are to do the same, obeying God's commands in the New Testament in qualifying, calling and ordaining ministers, elders and deacons in the church.

God-Assigned Duties

In this chapter, God not only appointed the priests and servants of the tabernacle. He also assigned them their two-fold duties.

First, the Levites were to guard the tabernacle from unauthorized access. No one except the priests and the Levites who were appointed and purified by sacrifices could come close. Death penalty is the sentence against anyone who violates this law, as we saw in the tragic examples of King Uzziah and Uzzah. God is a holy God, so he cannot fellowship with sinful mankind without provision for cleansing and forgiveness.

This is why today, there is to be church discipline—to guard the church from unrepentant members. Without church discipline, judgment will fall upon the church, false teaching will creep in

unnoticed and unchallenged, and—because there is no accountability—sin will increase. We can go regularly to worship services, Bible studies and retreats, and do daily devotions, but if we walk in disobedience, all of these are in vain and unacceptable to God and are filthy rags before God (Isa 64:6). Obedience is better than going through rituals (1 Sam 15:22; Heb 10:5-6). This is why in the heavenly city, “*nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life*” (Rev 21:27). In effect, throughout Biblical history and into eternity, God has nailed a sign at the entrance to his kingdom: “Unauthorized Persons Keep Out!”

But Christ removed this warning sign after he accomplished on the cross what God requires of us: a sacrifice for all our sins. Through his offering of body and blood as our Great High Priest, we are now authorized to go near God’s throne of grace (Heb 10:19-22). Unlike the Israelites who can never enter the tabernacle, whoever has faith in Christ can come boldly into God’s tabernacle without fear of judgment.

Second, the Levites were not only guardians of the tabernacle, they were also its caretakers. They were to take care of the tabernacle in camp and carry it during their march to the Promised Land. And they were to perform their duties according to the letter of God’s commandments, or else they be judged.

Today, we must also worship God only according to what he commands in Scripture. By the first two commandments, we are not to bow down to any other gods or idols. This means that human innovations such as drama, dances, jokes and other entertainment gimmicks are also implicitly forbidden. All true worship elements—prayers, songs, liturgy—are to be Scripture-centered (John 4:24). Having said that, our worship is not dead, mindless ritual full of pomp and circumstance, as in most old, mainline churches here and in Europe. John Calvin wrote about this kind of worship as, “alien hodgepodge, theatrical pomp, foolish gesticulations and empty little ceremonies, outward trappings, magical incantations, and perverse rites.” *Therefore, we are not to add to or subtract anything from God's commandments about worship* (Deu 4:2; Rev 22:18, 19), because our human minds are—according to John Calvin—corrupt and sinful and “a factory of idols.”

God appointed his servants in the tabernacle. God assigned them specific duties. As for the people, they are to worship God because he is the one who redeemed them from sin and death.

God-Redeemed People

Notice also that God commanded a census of the firstborn of Israel and the number of the Levites. God told Moses that all the firstborn and the Levites were his own special possession. Why did God set apart the Levites and the firstborn? God explains that while he struck dead all the firstborn of the Egyptians on the night of the Passover, he spared all the firstborn of Israel. Therefore, God consecrated all of their firstborn to remember their redemption (3:11-13).

Incidentally, the “dedication” of the infant Jesus in the Temple is part of the Mosaic Law: “*Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine*” (Exo 13:2, 12). Because Jesus was the firstborn son (Luke 2:7), he was to be consecrated (“made holy”) to the Lord with the sacrifice of a lamb or two pigeons (Luke 2:23). This

was the reason why firstborn males had to be counted. They were to be consecrated to God. But since all Israel—except the Levites—sinned when they worshiped the golden calf, the Levites took the place of the firstborn.¹

What does this have to do with us? Jesus is the firstborn of God, *“the firstborn of all creation,”* the only-begotten Son of God (Col 1:15). As well, Christ is also our Passover Lamb because he offered himself on the cross in order that God would not destroy us. When God saw the blood that he shed on the cross, it was sufficient offering for all of our sins—past, present, future. But this offering becomes an offering for our sins only when we trust Christ as our Redeemer. And because he is the firstborn, all those who have faith in him also become adopted firstborn children of God (Heb 12:23). This then is the great exchange: the Death of the Firstborn Son for the Eternal Life of Adopted Firstborn Children.

In the Old Testament, the firstborn son received a double inheritance from his father. Today, because we are firstborn children of God in Christ, we also have a heavenly inheritance waiting for us (1 Pet 1:4). We are assured of this eternal inheritance by the seal of his Holy Spirit, *“who is the guarantee [the down payment] of our inheritance until God redeems his possession”* (Eph 1:14).

Dear Friends, like the Israelites in the wilderness, you are to worship God only in the way he has commanded you. As he has appointed priests and Levites to lead them in worship, so ministers, elders and deacons are to lead the church in worship. As he has assigned duties to the Levites in their tabernacle worship, so the duties of church officers are now given in his Word. As the Levites performed a variety of duties assigned to them by God, so do the members of the church make use of their God-given gifts and talents for the building up of the church.

As the people of God, we have been endowed with many different gifts. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 that we are one body, but many parts, all working in harmony. Every member has his or her own God-given assignment. Each one has a contribution to build up the body of Christ. Some are leaders, others are members. Some care for the sick; others encourage those who are suffering. No member is more valuable than the other. The important thing is to fully use whatever gifts God has given to us individually.

In the same manner that the Levites were substituted for the redemption of the firstborn sons of Israel, Christ became our substitute so that we might become firstborn children of God. He shed his blood on the cross so that through faith, we might have a guaranteed inheritance in the kingdom of God. Guaranteed! This means we will never lose this inheritance! Let us rejoice in this knowledge and assurance, making sure of this inheritance through the fruits of the Spirit in us, now and forevermore.

¹ In our text, each Levite would take the place of each firstborn. The problem was, there were 273 fewer Levites than firstborns, so the 273 extra firstborns had to be redeemed with monetary offerings (Num 3:46-50).