

Christ’s work on the cross purchases a work of the Spirit in the life of the believer that causes him to love God. This is what all believers have in common and it is what makes the body of Christ into an intimate family.

The Faulty Covenant and the Rebellious People

It is important that we look back at the Old Covenant and the nation of Israel so that we can get a clear picture of what the New Covenant people of God are *not* like. In the New Testament the New Covenant is contrasted with the covenant that God made with the nation of Israel on Mount Sinai through Moses. The Old Covenant did not produce a believing people who loved God, nor was it ever intended to do so:

For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. For finding fault with them, He saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord (*Heb 8:7-9*).

From the point of view that the Old Covenant was just what God desired it to be, it was perfect; but from the point of view of it making a faithful and forgiven people of God, it was inadequate; it was faulty. It was unable to make a people acceptable to God and who actually loved God. This fits neatly with verse 9 above that describes the Israelites as unfaithful, and verses 10-12 that describe the benefits of the New Covenant as forgiveness of sin and love for God.

As a whole, the Israelites were an unbelieving people. They were God-haters rather than God-lovers. Let’s look at some major statements about the nation of Israel at pivotal points in their history. Moses said:

For I know thy rebellion, and thy stiff neck: behold, while I am yet alive with you this day, ye have been rebellious against the LORD; and how much more after my death?...For I know that after my death ye will utterly corrupt yourselves, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you in the latter days; because ye will do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger through the work of your hands (*Deut 31:27-29*).

When Judah was about to fall into captivity, these words of God confirm the words of Moses:

I will forsake the remnant of mine inheritance, and deliver them into the hand of their enemies; and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies;

because they have done that which was evil in my sight, and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came forth out of Egypt, even unto this day (*2 kings 21:14,15*).

From the time of the Exodus and throughout their glorious history the Israelites could always be characterized as a people who did evil and provoked God. From their constitution as a nation until their destruction it seems that there was never a time that Israel was a believing people who truly followed the Lord.

Malachi, who had the final word in the Old Testament about the Israelites, said: “Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them” (*Mal 3:7*). Again, the Israelites are shown to be unbelieving and disobedient. The Bible teaches that those whose lives are characterized by disobedience to God are unbelievers: “He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (*1 John 2:4*).

I am not saying that there were no real believers in the nation of Israel. I am only saying that Israel *as a whole* was unbelieving. Israel was not the church in the Old Testament, but merely a *picture* of the true people of God, that is, the church in the New Covenant era. God’s plan was to use the history of Israel as a teaching tool for the New Covenant people of God. But God does not use them as the *example* we are to follow:

With many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness. *Now these things were our examples*, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. *Now all these things happened unto them for examples*: and they are written for our admonition (*1 Cor 10:1-11*).

According to the Apostle Paul, the Israelites serve as the example *par excellence* of what *not* to do. They are the unbelieving people of God who rebelled. The real people of God are to learn from the consequences of their sinful behavior and strive *not* to be like them.

The New Covenant states that every true believer will receive forgiveness of all their sins and a new heart. That means that every true believer will be a God-lover. He is also saved into a body of believers that meet together to encourage one another to live for God.

The Church is for Professed Believers

During the time of the Reformation, the Anabaptists correctly understood that the local church is only made up of those who give evidence that they are a part of the New Covenant. Thus a proper profession of faith included not just trusting in Christ alone to save, but also a desire to live for Him. The evidence of a changed life was a necessary ingredient to a biblical profession of faith. The Anabaptists could not conceive of a church made up of both believers and unbelievers, as did the Reformers. Since infants were not capable of a biblical profession of faith, then they could not be part of the church. The Reformers ridiculed the Anabaptists for believing that the church could realistically be made up of only true believers. The Anabaptists did not hold to this view. They believed that unbelievers could indeed slip in among the believers, but they could only do so if they were masquerading as true believers. Scripture provides church discipline as the means to deal with those who only profess to believe, but in reality are God-haters.

Hebrews 8:11 speaks of those who are part of the New Covenant: “They shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest.” This is not a reference to mere intellectual knowledge of God, but this is about genuine love for God. That is, participants in the New Covenant must not only make a profession of faith, but they must also give evidence that it is genuine by exhibiting the fruit of a genuine love for God.

The Role of Elders in the New Covenant Community

The function of the elder in the church is both as a pastor or shepherd (*1 Peter 5:1-3*) and as a teacher (*Titus 1:9*). He shepherds or pastors by teaching the believer how to apply the Word of God to his life. He teaches by systematically equipping the believer with a biblical foundation. The elder is to be the equipper, *not the primary doer*, in the family of believers. He functions both as a coach and as a player. He is to work in such a way that the family of believers is being equipped to do the works of ministry. That means that when a believer is stuck in sin and a member of the body brings it to his attention, he will often function simply as an advisor. Each member of the body is able to admonish and care for his fellow believers and the elder’s role is to aid the rest of the body in that process:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it...It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists,

and some to be pastors and teachers, *to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up* until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, *as each part does its work* (*Eph 4:7, 11-16 NIV*).

The elders who seek to be the ones who do all or even most of the ministry are not fulfilling their function in the body of Christ. In fact, they are stunting the growth of the believers they are shepherding. Instead of being “chief cook and bottle washer,” elders ought to be working themselves out of a job. If they are discipling the family of believers for works of ministry, then the better they do their job, the more the believers will do the ministry, and the elders will experience less of the burden of being an elder.

It is the individual members of the family of believers who are the real ministers in the church. We ought to take back the use of the term “minister” from the professional clergy and once again begin to use it in its biblical sense. Each member of the body has a God-given vital ministry. That is exactly what Paul is saying above, “From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (*v16*). The work order by God for the church is that each member of the New Covenant community is to be involved in ministry, so that the whole body is built up in the faith. This work order includes teaching, admonishing, encouraging, meeting needs, comforting, and a host of other activities that are too often seen as the exclusive domain of the pastor.

This is why having paid staff working in your church is not always a good idea. There is nothing unbiblical with having paid staff at a local church. But the temptation that often comes with it is the pitfall of having the paid staff do the work of ministry. It is very time consuming and difficult to equip members of the body for ministry. It is just easier to pay someone else to do it. Since you are paying them, the issues of accountability and excellence are much easier to manage. The local church must be set up in such a way that the very structure of the church encourages each member of the body to do the works of ministry.

In our church we have a number of infants and toddlers that need some looking after on Sunday mornings. We have a nursery schedule in which every able-bodied believing woman is to take a turn looking after the kids. The believing men are on a schedule to teach a short gospel-centered Bible study to the older kids one Sunday a month. These are family chores and no one is exempt. We also give opportunities to all the believing men to lead our time in the Lord’s Supper. We have a time of sharing, encouragement and prayer each Sunday morning that is also led by various men in our church who are not elders. But the elders oversee this time and help these men grow in their abilities to care for the body. Many hands make the burden of ministry light. In the process, our people are trained to love one another biblically. If we were to hire a staff to do these jobs we would be robbing the body of these vital opportunities to grow.

The “Dumb Sheep” or Special Forces Soldiers?

There is no such thing as a “dumb sheep” in the body of Christ. Every member of the body is equipped by God and motivated for ministry. The New Covenant guarantees every believer to have a desire and ability to minister in the body of Christ. Because each believer is a recipient of the benefits of the New Covenant, all believers come to faith in Jesus Christ with a love for God and a desire to live for Him. All believers are in the process of being supernaturally motivated by the Spirit of God to live for Christ. Every member of the body is equipped and motivated for ministry.

Rather than thinking of most believers as dumb sheep, we should instead think of them as Special Forces soldiers. A soldier in the Special Forces of the military goes through specialized training for a specific task. He becomes an expert at the task for which he is trained. Not every soldier has a flashy and high profile job, but every job is vital to the war effort. The Lord Himself trains every believer for a specific and important job in furthering His kingdom. God the Holy Spirit has given specific spiritual gifts to every believer for works of ministry (the spiritual war effort). Every gift the Lord gives is vital for the life of God’s people: “The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal” (*1 Cor 12:7*). Every soldier in the Lord’s army is supernaturally trained to perform his vital functions. He does not determine his functions on his own, but should seek to determine what God has given him and then develop that giftedness for works of ministry. The work of ministry is the soldier’s work of doing battle in the Lord’s army.

Since all those who are a part of the New Covenant have been made God-lovers and are gifted by the Spirit, then each believer has a specific role to fill in the body of Christ. It was not our idea to come to faith in Jesus Christ (*Eph 1:4, 5, 11*). It was not our decision that determined what gift the Spirit would give us (*1 Cor 12:11*). Each believer has a vital God-ordained purpose in the family of God. Our sovereign God has determined that the church should function in just this way. To be a part of the family of believers and yet have no ministerial purpose is impossible in the New Covenant community. We make a grave mistake when we treat God’s Special Forces soldiers as dumb sheep.

One way you can tell if you have the dumb sheep mentality or the Special Forces mentality at work in your church, is by considering the way your church goes about making major decisions. Many church leaders simply do not trust the body of Christ. They fear that if they allow the body in on important church decisions, chaos will reign, fights will break out, and the church may even split. This thought process and practice does not do justice to the New Covenant. The New Covenant guarantees that every believer will be transformed and motivated by the Spirit of God (*Rom 8:5-14*). The Scripture describes each believer as having the “mind of Christ” (*1 Cor 2:16*). Therefore, the notion that the church body is somehow made up of dumb sheep that cannot be trusted to discuss and discern biblical issues is absurd.

It would be unwise to cut out of the decision-making process the wisdom of the family of believers and limit the interaction to just the elders. No elder or group of elders is so circumspect so as to be able to see a situation from every possible angle. As an elder you need the wisdom of the body to enable you to make an informed and responsible decision. If the body is so untrustworthy that chaos will ensue if you include them into the decision-making process, then you do not have a New Covenant community but an assembly of unbelievers.

If you are a pastor/elder you might be thinking that including the body of Christ in the decision-making process might diminish your God-given authority. Consider for a moment the relationship of husbands to their wives. It is clear that the husband has the final authority in the marriage relationship. Yet with that being understood, it must also be stated that any husband would be foolish to eliminate his wife from the decision-making process. He should recognize that he does not know all that he needs to know, that he has a limited point of view, and blind

spots. His wife will provide a very different perspective and will protect him from himself. In the same way it would be foolish to refuse to consult the wisdom of the family of believers, the New Covenant community, when the leadership is seeking to make a biblically sound decision. Why cut yourself off from a source of wisdom that the Spirit of God has given you? The local church has elders and they hold the final authority in the church. Yet elders are part of a family of believers, and it is the whole family of believers that has been the recipient of the transforming work of the Spirit of God that was purchased by our Lord Jesus Christ, the High Priest of the New Covenant.

All Believers are Priests in the New Covenant Era

The Israelites could only be a kingdom of priests if they kept the Old Covenant perfectly:

Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation (*Exod 19:5,6*).

We have seen that they did not keep the covenant perfectly, and God rejected them. They never were a kingdom of priests or a holy nation. In the Old Covenant era only a very few could become priests. In the New Covenant era, God guarantees that every member of the New Covenant is a priest. Once you are a part of the New Covenant through repentance and faith, there is no condition upon which a person in the church becomes a priest. Jesus has made every member of the New Covenant a priest unconditionally:

Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light (*1 Peter 2:9*).

In the New Covenant community every individual knows God and represents Him to the rest of the community. This means that every believer has a service to offer the body of Christ. God the Holy Spirit is in the process of transforming each believer. The Spirit gifts every believer for ministry. In the New Covenant era every believer is a priest; every believer is a minister. Any concept or structure of the church that does not biblically express the priesthood of all believers is fundamentally unbiblical and does not bring honor to the Lord of the New Covenant. □

— Adapted from the writings of Geoff Volker & Steve Lehrer

EVERY BELIEVER IS A MINISTER

Most people don’t give a second thought to the way church is done. They say, “We’ve always done it this way” and “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” I want to challenge you to give it a serious second thought by putting before you the biblical argument that every believer is a minister. This profound truth should change the way you “do church” in many ways.

The local church is made up of professed followers of Jesus Christ. It is a family of believers. I use the word “family” in its most intimate sense. The church is a group of people who have something far more important than “blood” in common; they have the New Covenant. Understanding the New Covenant is the key to understanding the church. In Hebrews 10, the saving work of Jesus Christ is described as the New Covenant. The ineffective work of the Levitical priests is contrasted with the effective work of Christ:

And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: but this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; from henceforth expecting till His enemies be made His footstool (*Heb 10:11-13*).

Christ’s work actually accomplished something. He acquired perfect forgiveness of sins while the Levitical priests were unable to obtain any forgiveness of sins for those they represented. But Christ purchased more than simply the forgiveness of sins: “By one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (*Heb 10:14 NIV*). This verse gives a description of the two things that Christ purchased for all those He represented. First, there is the forgiveness of sins that makes the believer “perfect” in God’s sight. We call this justification. Then believers are referred to as “those who are being made holy.” That is, Christ purchased a work of the Spirit of God in the life of every believer to progressively make him holy. We call this sanctification. The work of forgiveness and the work of making one holy can never be separated.

The author of Hebrews identifies the combination of justification and sanctification as the New Covenant by his quotation of Jeremiah 31 in verses 15-18:

Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us: for after that He had said before, This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; and their sins and iniquities will I remember no more. Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin (*Heb 10:15-18*).