

## **READING THE BIBLE FOR ALL ITS WORTH**

### **The Universal and Special Priesthood No. 6**

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#### **Text: Jeremiah 2:4-9**

We have been studying, these past Sunday evenings, the characteristically dialectical presentation of truth as a principle of the Bible's pedagogy, a most important principle that Christians must reckon with in their reading of the Bible and preachers in their preaching if the Bible is to be understood correctly and Christians attain real maturity in the life of faith. We have pointed out that it is the Bible's virtually universal method to teach us its doctrine and its ethics in terms of the polarities that lie at opposite ends of any continuum of truth. Its theology, for example, presents with the polar tension created by a doctrine of God that emphasizes equally the divine unity and the triple personality; its Christology presents us with an equally unresolvable tension between Christ's deity and his humanity; its soteriology, or doctrine of salvation, in many different ways presents us with the tension that must exist and cannot be relaxed between the divine and the human, between divine election and human responsibility and freedom; between divine justification and human faith, repentance, and obedience; between the imputation of Christ's righteousness by a divine gift and the judgment of our lives according to our works. Similarly in the Bible's ethics we find these tensions everywhere. We have considered already the difficulty but the necessity of paying equal respect to the competing biblical interests of fidelity to the truth and the unity of the church in love and, last Lord's Day evening, of chastity and modesty with that of the celebration of sexual desire and its fulfillment.

We have spoken of the importance of this pedagogy and of our recognition of it when we read the Bible and hear it preached. We all tend to prefer some of its teaching and to ignore or minimize what we do not like so much or find more difficult. But, the Bible, by speaking so directly, so bluntly, now on this point, now on that, hunts out our biases and forces us to face the truth squarely. It gives us sovereignty so clearly we cannot squirm off that hook and then human freedom so bluntly we cannot evade that either. We must believe both, however difficult; we must live both, however much tension results along the way. It is only when pressure is felt from both sides that the keystone of the arch is kept firmly in place.

Tonight, I want to give you a further illustration of the Bible's way of presenting its doctrine and, in so doing, another example of how the truth of God's Word can be so easily misshapen in our hands and hearts because we do not respect the dialectical, the polar fashion in which these truths are taught us in Holy Scripture. We allow the tension between counterpoised truths to dissipate by preferring one pole to another, by weakening one end of the continuum of truth, that end, always, that is either least agreeable to our spiritual culture or to our circumstances individually.

Tonight, then, we have before us the juxtaposition in Holy Scripture of the general and the special priesthood, of the priesthood of all believers and the dependence of the church upon the ministry, of the right of private judgment, on the one hand, and the authority of the offices of the church, on the other.

I chose this topic for several reasons. We dealt with it in an all too brief a way in a sermon several Sunday mornings back. You remember the text in John 20:23 where the Lord, speaking to his apostles, said, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." I realized at the time that the sermon was probably raising more questions than it was answering in many minds and this evening's study will give me at least one opportunity to place that teaching in a larger context. Additionally, people's reaction to this teaching in the Bible is a splendid illustration of the influence of culture to lead us to prefer one pole to another. Finally, in my judgment, it is one of the dialectics we absolutely must recover if the church is to regain her health and vitality in our day.

At one end of this continuum of truth lies the doctrine of *the priesthood of all believers*. It is a doctrine precious to Protestant Christians. Each believer has his or her own relationship to God; each is responsible for that relationship -- for the faith, the love, the obedience that he or she is to bring to it; each has his or her own direct access to God; each is capable of reading the Bible and understanding it for oneself; indeed, each is responsible, like the Bereans, to listen to ministers with Bible in hand to see if what is being preached agrees with what is taught in Holy Scripture. The Bible celebrates the individual life of faith in many ways and certainly addresses the individual directly as responsible for his or her relationship to God.

All of that is absolutely true. And, as an emphasis, it is compatible with American democratic and individualistic ideals. But by itself, unbalanced with its counter-pole, this doctrine of the universal priesthood has created a situation such as we see everywhere in the church today -- Christians moving from church to church seeking a ministry agreeable to their own opinions; Christians reading the Bible for themselves in ways that are designed to confirm them in their own opinions rather than sanctify their minds and hearts; Christians resentful of authority; defensive when admonished for what is clearly sinful in their lives; and churches more and more seeing themselves as responsible to make people happy rather than holy; afraid to make demands upon their Christian congregations for fear they will up and move down the street to a more accommodating ministry. You have a Protestant evangelical church that Thomas Howard leaves for Rome in part because it is so toothless, so lacking in that authority that it ought to have according to the Bible, because it has made itself a hostage to the warring sentiments of a million individuals. As he argued in justifying his departure for Rome, when someone nowadays claims to be an evangelical lesbian, for example, the American Protestant church can do nothing except publish a forum in *Christianity Today* in which one person argues *for* evangelical lesbianism and someone else argues *against* it. Where is the voice of the Church of God, where is the authority of that voice that can pronounce a clear and unmistakable judgment as to the mind of God?

There is, you see, another pole on this continuum of truth, at the opposite end from the priesthood of all believers. And that other pole is the centrality of the Christian ministry and the authority of the Christian eldership in the life of God's people; the dependence of the people of God upon their ministers for their personal spiritual health, vitality, and fruitfulness and their obligation to submit to and obey those who are over them in the Lord.

This doctrine is not so congenial to our American, democratic ideals. We American Christians have breathed deeply an anti-elite, anti-authority spirit. In the church this reveals itself as anti-clericalism (often disguised as a diminished clericalism) which is now in many evangelical circles

thought to be an important virtue. It is not natural for us, not easy for us to think ourselves so dependent upon our ministers; to think of our own well-being and that of our families and churches as so intimately connected to the work of our ministers and our elders. Nor is it easy for us to think of the elders of the church as being *over us*, except, perhaps, in the way in which a board of trustees is over a company, exercising from a distance some strictly regulated power of review and control.

Not so long ago I came across this from Tony Campolo, the well-known evangelical speaker. “Seminaries have been spending too much time preparing clergy-persons. What I would love to see is the seminaries of America filled with people learning theology so that they have a basis for doing ministry in worldly vocations.” There it is, the priesthood of all believers overwhelming the biblical dialectic.

Campolo’s is a common sentiment. The contemporary emphasis on body-life and spiritual gifts has, somehow seemed to make the offices of the minister and elder less important. So too has a misshapen idea of the Reformed doctrine of calling. One often hears it said that every Christian is a minister. A church I know had as its slogan: “Where Christ is Lord and every member is a minister.” There is truth in that, of course, but in our day it has gone far to diminish the special office of the minister in the mind and heart of the church. Many ministers themselves have contributed to that diminishment, seeing themselves and speaking of themselves less as ministers of the Word of God and pastors of the church in the classical Christian sense and more as CEOs or administrators or facilitators, or counselors, or change-agents in the fashion of Carl Rogers. And what is true of the ministry of the Word may also be said, necessary changes being made, of the office of elder.

But, however popular, however widely accepted this diminishment of the central importance of the ministry and eldership to the church and to all Christians may be in our day, it finds no support in the Bible.

I have read to you a portion of Jeremiah’s great sermon on apostasy. Now, without doubt, the great practical question which engages the mind of any interested reader of the Bible is precisely why God’s people turned away from him as they did. The answer that the Lord gave through Jeremiah is the same answer repeatedly given elsewhere in Scripture. As Jeremiah puts it in v. 8, insofar as it is possible to assign particular blame for Israel and Judah’s apostasy, it is the fault of the ministers of the Word, the priests and prophets.

No doubt, this does not excuse the people, for, as Jeremiah will say in 5:31, the priests may have exercised a faithless ministry, but ‘the people love it this way.’ Nevertheless, the ministers of the Word, the priests and prophets, bear the first and primary responsibility for the spiritual collapse of the church.

If you read through the prophecies of Jeremiah you will see that the culpability of the ministers and other church officers (prophets and leaders or elders) for the spiritual disaster that has overtaken the people of God is one of his major themes. Over and again he draws attention to their fundamental accountability for the spiritual condition of the people. As he puts it once more in 23:1:

“ ‘Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my

pasture!’ declares the Lord.”

The NT has the same viewpoint. The Lord frequently in the Gospels lays the fault for the unbelief of that generation of the church at the feet of its ministry. The people were sheep without a shepherd. And in the epistles over and over again the church is put on warning against a corrupt ministry, whether in life or in doctrine, as certain to bring ruin to the church.

But the centrality of the ministry is not stated only in negative terms. Many times over we are taught in Holy Scripture that faithful ministries will be the divine instrumentality of the salvation and sanctification of the church.

The ministry of the faithful priest is described in these terms by Malachi (2:6): ‘True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.’

The Apostle Paul puts it still more strongly in his exhortation to Timothy: ‘Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you **will save both yourself and your hearers.**’ [1 Tim. 4:16] Astonishing words!

Now, however little attention may be given to this biblical doctrine in our day, it was not doubted in previous days. Christians knew much better than we do how critical the ministry was to their own spiritual life and salvation. They knew that the faithfulness and the consecration of the Christian ministry and of the church’s leadership in general was, humanly speaking, the key to everything good and holy.

Richard Baxter was stating a universally accepted axiom not making controversy when he wrote: ‘All churches either rise or fall as the ministry doth rise or fall (not in riches or worldly grandeur) but in knowledge, zeal, and ability for their work.’ And it was only to emphasize the immense practical importance of what was considered an obvious truth that a stone, laid at the door of the Old Kirk, Kiltarn, Ross-shire in Scotland, should bear the inscription: ‘This stone shall bear witness against the parishioners of Kiltarn if they bring an ungodly minister in here.’

It is a basic law of the kingdom of God, taught and illustrated countless times in Holy Scripture, that the church will be as her ministers and elders are, that she will grow and prosper as her ministers and elders lead and teach and inspire her to do so, that she will be no more healthy than her ministers and elders and **cannot rise** above them in spiritual life or strength.

Now that ministers should play this central role in the life of the church and of Christians should not surprise us. The ministry is central and of fundamental importance to the well-being of the church precisely because of what ministers are responsible for and what they have been charged to do in his name by the King and Head of the church.

**I. In the first place, the office of the minister is crucial to the life of the church precisely because the Word of God and especially the preaching of the Word of God are crucial to the life of Christians and the church and the office of elder likewise because that office is responsible to see that the church lives her life according to the Word of God.**

The reason why Jeremiah and the other prophets judged the priests and prophets to have caused Israel's downfall, was precisely because God made his people to depend upon the pure preaching of his Word. When these priests and prophets gave the people instead a corrupt preaching, when in their preaching they betrayed the Word of God, they were as much as cutting off the church's life support. And when the elders refused to put matters right, to insist that the church be directed according to the pure Word of God it was only a matter of time before unbelief had become the principle of the church's life.

It is the biblical mark of the faithful pastor that, as Malachi put it, 'true instruction is in his mouth.' It is a simple fact, lying face up on countless pages of Holy Scripture that the primary, the most important means by which God speaks to his people through the Bible is by preaching. He sanctifies them, Scripture says, by the Word of his truth, and that word comes most powerfully and pierces most deeply into the soul when it is preached by a faithful and gifted minister.

We may have grown up in circles which failed to articulate this point clearly; we may have heard much more often of the importance of daily devotions or what was, in my youth, ingloriously referred to as 'Quiet Time.' But, important as private meditation in the Scripture no doubt is, in the Bible preaching is God's primary instrumentality of communication. It is in the OT, it is in the NT and, if you read church history and think carefully about your own experience you will find it not only has been so, but is so even today when Christians are so uncertain or positively doubtful of preaching's importance. As our Shorter Catechism put it:

'The Spirit of God maketh the reading, **but especially the preaching** of the Word an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.'

This is what makes the ministry so vital and so critical to every Christian. If you are to hear God's life changing voice, and continue to hear it all your life long, it is primarily upon preaching that you must depend. I do not mean, of course, that God does not speak in a Christian's personal reading of the Bible; but I do very definitely mean that he speaks most clearly, most powerfully, most memorably, and most often through his preachers, those appointed **by** him to speak **for** him in the church. Preaching has always been the life-blood of the church and of the Christian life. Christians and the church as a whole have prospered when preaching has been faithful and powerful, and have, correspondingly, declined and suffered when it has been weak or faithless. That is a very easy thing to demonstrate in church history.

That is why preaching is everywhere in the Bible the minister's great calling and primary responsibility. You might not think so listening even to ministers speak of the ministry today. You might think that Ephesians 4:12 were the only statement in the Bible concerning the duties of the minister and that his great purpose was 'to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up...' That is important no doubt. But it is hardly the Bible's main point regarding the work of the ministry.

In our democratic, egalitarian day, the most popular text on the ministry has become Ephesians 4:12. It became popular almost overnight as a result of being translated differently in some modern

versions than it had been in the KJV. I have my own doubts as to the accuracy of that translation; it may well be that the KJV is more faithful to Paul's meaning. But, for the moment, let us assume that the NIV is correct in teaching that the function of the pastor is "to prepare God's people for works of service..." That sounds very modern, very American. The minister is an enabler, an equipper of others. His job is to help others do their jobs. And this is the way an entire generation of ministers have been trained and encouraged to think of their work: as equipping others for works of service. I am sure this is one reason why preaching is not the consuming interest of many ministers today. There are many ways to equip the church for service, preaching is but one of them.

From Deuteronomy to the Prophets, from the history of early Christianity in the book of Acts to Paul's instructions to Timothy, the minister is first and last a preacher of the Word of God. As Paul said to Timothy, the minister will **save** his **hearers**, i.e. those who listen to his preaching. And if the church is to be revived in our day, it will come about, as it always has, through her ministers seeing the need to devote themselves once again with an unqualified devotion to their calling as preachers of the Word of God.

Marian M'Naught was a godly woman in mid-17th century Scotland and she had a faithful minister of her own. But often she would make the effort to travel beyond her own parish to the small parish church of Anwoth to hear the preaching of Samuel Rutherford. 'I go to Anwoth so often,' she said, 'because, though other ministers show me the majesty of God and the plague of my own heart, Mr. Samuel does both these things, but he also shows me, as no other minister ever does, the loveliness of Christ.'

Is this not a recipe for the renewal of your own life and that of this church and all churches; to have held before you in an interesting and persuasive and winsome and soul-stirring manner, every Lord's Day, the majesty of God, the plague of your own heart, and the loveliness of Jesus Christ? And notice, she found those graces **under preaching! She depended upon a minister for them!** It is true that many church-going people are content with and would actually prefer in the sermons they hear what G. K. Chesterton once described as 'one solid and polished cataract of platitudes flowing for ever and ever.'

But what Christians need is the hammer that breaks the rocks into pieces. And that is what the Word of God is in the hands of a faithful and gifted and divinely accredited Christian minister. What a task for a mere man and an inveterate sinner to boot! He must be a man of spiritual experience himself, a man who knows of what he speaks when he applies the truth of God to the secrets of the human soul. He must be a man whose own life is a powerful recommendation of the words he speaks in God's name. 'Watch your life and doctrine closely,' Paul exhorted Timothy, 'for by them you will save both yourself and your hearers.'

Whenever the church has been thinking rightly it has understood that a minister of the Word must be these two things and must be them to an eminent degree. As Benjamin Warfield put it: 'A minister must be learned, on pain of being utterly incompetent for his work. But, before and above being learned, a minister must be godly. Nothing could be more fatal, however, than to set these two things over against one another. Recruiting officers do not dispute whether it is better for soldiers to have a right leg or a left leg; soldiers should have both legs.' The ministry of preaching, I tell you on the authority of God's Holy Word is the most demanding occupation in the world. But,

I also tell you, by that same authority, that if you love your own soul and if you love the church and if you love your children, you will care about few things more than that your minister preach the Word of God to you and all the Christians here with you with depth and comprehensiveness and grace and power and effect. I tell you: I grew up in the separatist Presbyterian church under weak preaching, well-meaning, but weak preaching and had no idea until later how life-transforming, how heavenly, how unspeakably helpful and solemnizing and ennobling preaching can be when it is the life's work of a man who has the gifts and callings of a preacher and devotes himself without qualification to that work.

Now, I have said all of this because it is so plainly the teaching of the Bible. It is, of course, much easier for me to preach this message in some other church than in my own. You know me too well and have too long listened to my sermons not to have rise in your minds the obvious question whether my preaching or my life are adequate to bear the great weight that has been placed upon them. It would be improper and unwise for me to speak of these things here and now. I must leave those judgments to you and, of course, to the Lord. But, we all must listen to the Word of God and believe what it teaches us about how God intends us to live our lives and receive his blessing. If we are to understand and then practice aright the teaching of the Word and our life in the church of God, then we must face the fact that we have to live holding fast to both poles: the priesthood of all believers and the authority of the officers of the church over the people of God.

And, of course, I could go on if time permitted. We haven't spoken as much of the office of the elder and the practice of church discipline, nor have we at all exhausted the special role in the life of God's people that Holy Scripture assigns to the Christian ministry. There is the minister's responsibility for the corporate worship of the church, for example, that Lord's Day worship that, in the Bible, is given such a vital role in the nurture, the growth, and the preservation of true Christian faith.

We must make an end. But, you see the point. These are two very different emphases. In one the Bereans are commended for themselves checking out the teaching they received from no less than the Apostle Paul to ensure that it was faithful to the Word of God. In the other, Christians are commanded both to obey those over them in the Lord and to receive the preaching of the Word of God as the very voice of God himself, even though it is mediated through the voice, even the mind, of a very ordinary and sinful man. Talk about treasure in earthen vessels!

That is why the office of minister is of such terrible accountability. Because so much rests upon his work; God's people and their salvation depend so heavily on what he does and how well he does it. Here is Richard Baxter: 'I am afraid, nay, I have no doubt, that the day is near when unfaithful ministers will wish that they had never know the charge of souls; but that they had rather been colliers, or sweeps, or tinkers, than pastors of Christ's flock; when, besides all the rest of their sins, they shall have the blood of so many souls to answer for.'

If that is frightening, listen to this from Henry Scougal, the author of the classic, The Life of God in the Soul of Man: '...if the negligence of a minister doth hazard the souls of others, it doth certainly ruin his own, which made St. Chrysostom say: 'Indeed, of the ministers of the church I do not think that many are saved.'

This is what the ministry is: the essential foundation of the life, health, and salvation of the Christian church. And no wonder God's people have known that, as it were by a holy instinct, so much of the time. In the midst of the Idi Amin terror in Uganda, the Anglican church in Great Britain wrote requesting ways in which they might help the Anglican church of Uganda, a church that was suffering bitter persecution from Amin's Muslim faction. They were supposing, I imagine, that they would be asked for money or for food. Instead the request came back for a supply of clerical collars. When Christians are dying, the bishop of the church in Uganda wrote, they need to be able to identify their ministers. I find that as a minister a solemn reminder of my calling and, at the same time, a tremendous illustration of the place of the ministry in the life of the Christian church.

I don't think we can entirely resolve the tension created by the existence of these two poles in the Bible's teaching. Every believer is a priest, absolutely. But, also, every believer depends upon his Priest, capital "P". Neither one of those poles can do without the other. The tension between them is essential to holy living as God has summoned us to it.