

Studies in Exodus No. 34

Exodus 29:1-46

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Review

We are in the lengthy account of the liturgical regulations, or regulations for Israel's worship that God gave to Moses on the top of Mt. Sinai. After the regulations concerning the manufacture of the sanctuary furniture and the construction of the tabernacle itself together with its altar, we have come to the priests who will make the sacrifices on that altar in that sanctuary. We considered the high priest's clothing and that of the other priests last Lord's Day evening. Now we come to the ceremony of their ordination.

We have referred to this material, only partially in fun, as the "boring part of the Bible." But consider this comment by the famous Herman Witsius, the 17th century Dutch Reformed theologian.

"God created the whole world in six days, but he used forty to instruct Moss about the tabernacle. Little over one chapter was needed to describe the structure of the world, but six were used for the tabernacle." [*Misc. Sacrorum*, I, 1712, 394f. cited in Childs, 547]

Witsius is reminding us of the importance attached to these things in the Bible as measured by the space devoted to them. And remember, it will be the corruption of this worship that will become a principle accusation of the prophets against Israel and a primary reason for their warning the people of God's impending wrath. There is, as we have been saying, more here than meets the eye.

Text Comment

- v.2 The animal and cereal offerings required for the following ritual of ordination are mentioned first.

- v.4 The ceremony begins, as did the covenant renewal ceremony for the entire people, with a ritual cleansing (cf. 19:10, 14). Before the priest can be dressed he must be clean. The construction of a basin or laver to hold the water for such washings is ordered in 30:17-21. So this washing prior to ordination is a ritual act to be repeated every time the priest arrives to minister in the sanctuary.

- v.6 Then Aaron is dressed in the clothing the manufacture of which was expressly detailed in the previous chapter.

- v.7 The precise composition of this oil and its uses is described in 30:22-33. Anointing as we know, also with kings and prophets, designated God's choice of a particular man for a particular office or calling. This "anointing" is the origin of the word "Messiah" and "Christ" both words meaning "anointed one," the first in Hebrew and the second in

Greek. In any case, in the West we “crown” a king; in the East they anointed a king. Same idea.

- v.9 Here is the first use of “ordain” in the Bible (with its antecedent in 28:41) and the origin of the term in Christian usage for the installation of men into holy office. The idiom here translated “ordain” literally means “to fill the hand.” It is an old phrase, found in still more ancient ANE texts, whose meaning is not entirely certain. It probably means something like “induct them into the rights and responsibilities of their position,” but how that phrase came to mean *that* is not clear.
- v.10 Though they have already been ritually cleansed with water, they must now offer sacrifice for their sins to be purified for their service in the temple. The ritual of laying on of hands indicates the transfer of guilt. The guilt of Aaron’s sin and that of his descendants who would serve as his assistants was symbolically transferred to the animal that would then die on account of that guilt. Vicarious atonement is pictured here: the death of one for another. But, of course, as the pious Israelite well understood, the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin. It is a sign only of how sin and guilt are taken away.

But it is a reminder that even the best things we do require to be forgiven. The priests must be cleansed before they can superintend the services of the sanctuary by which others seek forgiveness.

Not for our sins alone
Thy mercy, Lord, we sue;
Let fall thy pitying glance
On our devotions too,
What we have done for Thee
And what we think to do.

They holiest hours we spend
In prayer upon our knees,
The times when most we deem
Our songs of praise will please;
Thou searcher of all hearts
Forgiveness pour on these.

- v.11 The place where the sacrifice – the death of the animal took place – is significant. It took place at the entrance. Without their cleansing and without Yahweh’s authority given to them, they could go no further into the sanctuary and do nothing useful there. They must have this cleansing first. Once the death has been accomplished the blood can then be taken to the altar.
- v.12 The daubing and pouring of the blood – which symbolizes life given up in death; the horns perhaps especially symbolized the Lord’s presence at the altar – is a way of ritually

applying the death that has taken place to the benefit of the one who is here being ordained.

- v.14 Here and in all such descriptions of sacrifice it is important to note that there are two different Hebrew words used, both of which are translated “burn” in the NIV. The first word is used of what is cooked on the altar; a burning that produces a pleasing aroma, both for God and for man. The other verb refers to burning that destroys. The parts of the animal that are offered to God are burned in one sense, in the positive sense; the unclean parts are taken away and destroyed by fire.

This is a *sin offering*, a point needing to be made because right after this a different sacrifice, the *burnt offering*, will be offered. Here only the fat parts are burned, the rest of the animal, including the meat is destroyed. The distinction between the various types of offering, e.g. the difference between a sin offering and a burnt offering, is never explicitly explained anywhere in the Old Testament. One has to deduce a distinction from clues given here and there. Most of the material on the sacrifices focuses on description, not explanation. Obviously Moses’ contemporaries understood the differences and the significance of each type of sacrifice. All of the sacrifices were gifts to God in some way, but each served a separate purpose on behalf of the worshipper and for the sake of the covenant between God and himself. In any case, all of these sacrifices being used for the ordination of the priests were sacrifices used in the worship of Israel. They were not unique to this service.

- v.18 The meat of the first ram was to be burned on the altar. Nothing was to be eaten; it was to be consumed on the altar. The burnt offering was, like the sin offering, concerned with the forgiveness of sins, but it also expressed dedication or consecration to God.
- v.20 The sense seems to be that with his ear the priest will hear and obey, and with his hands and feet work for the Lord, so those parts of his body are symbolically cleansed.
- v.26 That is, Aaron and his assistants will eat this part of the meat that has been cooked.
- v.28 Remember, as we saw when considering the ceremony of covenant renewal in chapter 24, the peace or fellowship offerings provided food for the people to eat as part of their communion with the Lord. It is this offering, we said, that is the true antecedent of the Lord’s Supper.
- v.35 As you know, seven is the number of perfection and completeness.
- v.36 Even the altar itself had to be purified, perhaps because it had been built with sinful human hands, perhaps because it will be used by sinful human hands.
- v.38 Now follows some general regulations for the sacrifices to be performed at the tabernacle.

- v.39 Each day at the tabernacle is to be opened and closed with gifts to God. These daily offerings continued in the temple and into the Christian era. The shepherds who tended the flocks near Bethlehem when Jesus was born may very well have been raising lambs for the daily sacrifice in Jerusalem. Each year some 700 were required.
- v.45 These things being rightly done, God will dwell with Israel and be her God. If it is true that Israel will enjoy God's presence because of his grace, redeeming her from bondage in Egypt, it is also true that that presence will continue with Israel only if she obeys the Lord and her priests before her and worship him aright.
- v.46 The purpose of the great redemption from Egypt was that Yahweh could dwell with Israel in covenant. It is akin to the statement Jesus made to the woman at the well in Samaria in John 4 that the Father seeks those who will worship him in Spirit and in truth.

There can be little doubt about the fundamental purpose of all of this ceremonial. The Lord tells us straightaway at the conclusion: when the ministry is properly called, when the priests are holy and perform their function in the sanctuary according to God's will, *then* God will dwell among the Israelites and *be their God*. "Be their God" means not simply that he will count Israel as his people, but that he will *be a God* to them; he will act on their behalf, bless them and keep them, meet their needs and save them. For God to *be our God* is the Bible's shortest way of saying everything we mean by salvation. In Rev. 21 we read that heaven is supremely the place *where God is our God and we are his people*.

So the priesthood, or what we said last Sunday evening could just as well be called "the Christian ministry," is essential to God's plan for the salvation of his people. If God is to be our God, if he is to be a God to us, if he is to dwell with us, *it is essential that the priesthood fulfill its role*. Priests must answer their divine summons. They must conduct their work in obedience to the Lord and on behalf of the people. And that is the same thing, in our day, as saying that the Christian ministry must fulfill its responsibilities in faithfulness to God and to their calling from him. There is much more that could be said from this chapter about the priesthood or the ministry. We could speak of their sinfulness and imperfection, the emphasis that falls here upon their need for forgiveness and cleansing. The work of the ministry must be done *and can be done* by deeply imperfect men. But it is on the main point that I want to reflect tonight: viz. the essential role of the ministry to the welfare of God's people and their relationship to him. We have been discovering fundamental perspectives on the life of the kingdom of God embedded in this liturgical or ceremonial regulation and tonight's material is no exception.

It is a subject that needs special emphasis in our egalitarian and democratic age. We have a deep-seated aversion to the notion that we are in some profound way dependent upon others or that others have been given an authority to which we must submit or, even, that others may be more important than we are in the overall scheme of things. Ministers struggle with these same aversions. It was not for nothing that Robert Murray McCheyne said that envy was the bottom sin of ministers. But, like it or not, it is emphatic teaching of large tracts of Holy Scripture that the life of the church and of individual Christians will be according to the faithfulness of the ministry in their day. The church is as her ministers. She waxes and wanes after them. I made this point – what I thought was a perfectly obvious point to be made from large tracts of Holy

Scripture – in a lecture some years ago given at Covenant Theological Seminary. I was reminding the seminarians of their responsibilities and their accountability before God and of the connection the Scripture makes countless times between a minister’s faithfulness and the salvation and sanctification of God’s people. So unaccustomed were these young men to hearing these biblical commonplaces, so little used to reading the same in the literature of the Christian ministry, that the seminary had to have a faculty panel discussion after I left to deal with the fallout. There were those among the students that thought I was introducing some form of Roman Catholic priestcraft by saying that, once Christian ministers, they would be responsible for the spiritual life of the people under their care and the salvation of others hung in the balance as they considered with what faithfulness, industry, and spiritual commitment they would do their work. Fact is, however uncongenial to contemporary evangelicalism and however un-American, that emphasis is found in virtually every classic work on the Christian ministry, including the classics of the Reformed ministry. It was not a Roman Catholic, it was the very Protestant Puritan Richard Baxter who wrote in his classic work on the ministry, *The Reformed Pastor* [199]:

“I am afraid, nay, I have no doubt, that the day is near when unfaithful ministers will wish that they had never known 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.”

And Baxter is not talking only about a minister’s faithfulness to biblical teaching; he is also talking about the diligence with which he pursues his calling as a pastor. After all, it was the Apostle Paul, in Acts 20, who introduced the idea of a pastor being responsible for the blood of others because he didn’t work hard enough at his calling.

To the extent that the prophets ever explain what went wrong in Israel and Judah, why, after God lavished so great favors upon her, she turned from him and followed false gods instead, the answer given is always the same. It was the ministers who led her astray: the priests and the prophets. It was at worship that Israel lost her soul. And it was her ministers that took it from her. “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...” is how Hosea puts it (4:6) in his diatribe against false priests and prophets. “...my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered.... I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock,” is how Ezekiel puts it (34:1-10). “Those who guide this people mislead them, and those who are guided are led astray,” said Isaiah (Isa. 9:10). “The priests did not ask, ‘Where is the Lord?’ Those who deal with the law did not know me; the leaders rebelled against me.... ‘Therefore I bring charges against you again,’ declares the Lord. ‘And I will bring charges against your children’s children.’” That is Jeremiah (2:8-9). And there are a great many such explanatory texts in the prophets.

When Paul says to ministers, in 1 Tim. 4:16:

“Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself *and your hearers*,”

he is saying the same thing, only in a positive way. The priesthood, the ministry is essential to the spiritual wellbeing, the salvation of God's people. As a general rule, instrumentally speaking, it is by and through the ministry that God dwells with his people.

So much is this the case the history of the church is, to a very great degree, the history of her ministry. Her story is told as a story of the men who occupied this office, who led God's people in worship, who instructed them in the Word of God. There are certainly wonderful stories to be told of Christian laymen and laywomen through the ages. Much of the actual work of kingdom building has been done by the laity through the ages. No one can doubt that who reads the Word of God or church history. Nevertheless, all of that depended upon the ministry in the first place and to a very great degree the history of the church has been the history of its ministers, its priests. When they have been great the church grew great; when they have been weak or faithless, the church became the same.

I was reminded of this the other day when Elder Hannula asked me to provide for him a list of what I regarded as the best Christian biographies for Christians to read today. He had several make up a list of such recommendations for use in the Sunday School class he was teaching on the value and importance of reading Christian biography. I was told to list five, but, by the time I was done, I had given him a list of fourteen. Of those fourteen, two were the biographies of Christian laymen: C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton. Twelve were the biographies or autobiographies of Christian ministers from all periods of church history. But to know those 12 stories (from Chrysostom in the fourth century to Martyn Lloyd Jones in the 20th) is to know the story of the church, of God's kingdom in the world.

Actually, I added another list of works that didn't make my top list (fifteen more, twelve of which were the biographies of Christian ministers, one of a Catholic nun, one of a French woman philosopher, and one of a French king). I'm sure that list is also typical. For all the great stories of Christian laymen who have glorified God and built his kingdom, there are many more of Christian ministers because it has been they who have guided the church to victory or defeat, who have inspired or dispirited the people of God, who have made the truth as it is in Jesus a power or an irrelevance in the life of the body of Christ.

Imagine trying to tell the story of the church without the personal history of Athanasius or Augustine, Patrick or Bernard of Clairvaux, Luther or Calvin, Tyndale or Thomas Cranmer, Samuel Rutherford or John Bunyan, John Wesley or Jonathan Edwards, David Livingstone or John Paton, or J. Gresham Machen. The history of the church is the history of her great men and the history of her men is, by and large, the history of her ministers. That is a simple fact of history. And it is a fact that the entire Bible prepares us to believe. We have here in Exodus 29 only the beginning of long ages of emphasis on the vital importance of the ministry to the dwelling of God among his people of, to his being his people's God in truth.

It is only to be faithful to the repeated and emphatic teaching of the Bible to say that the church would never have sunk into such miserable idolatry and spiritual lethargy in the Middle Ages had it not been for the dereliction and positive defection of the Christian ministry. And the great Protestant churches of our land would never have been largely lost to the cause of the Gospel of Christ were it not for the ministry that taught the multitudes coming to worship every Sunday to

doubt the authority of the Bible and to take their wisdom from the world instead of the Word of God. There are no more consequential sins than the sins of the Christian ministry. It is this terrible accountability, so often and so emphatically stated in the Bible, that has led, in the best literature of the Christian ministry to a nearly unbearable solemnity when speaking of the duties of a minister. “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly,” is how James put it. Bad enough. Henry Scougal carries the logic out to its conclusion, a conclusion he admits he would rather leave in Latin than translate into English.

“If the negligence of a minister doth hazard the souls of others, it doth certainly ruin his own, which made Chrysostom say: ‘For my part, I do not think that many of the church’s ministers are saved.’” [Pref. to *Live of God in the Soul of Man*, xxiv]

Surely it can be nothing but shallow sentimentality to think otherwise, given what God says here at the end of Exodus 29: that his relationship to his people is mediated through the faithful exercise of a minister’s responsibilities. And given the long stretches of Christian history during which the largest part of the church has lived and died in unbelief. The ordinary evangelical seminarian nowadays does not think this way about the work he is preparing to undertake.

And when the church is in doldrums and languishing in spiritual apathy, how does God rouse her to new life except by raising up a new kind of ministry for her: think of the 16th century Reformers or the Great Awakening men. To tell the story of the recovery of the Gospel in the 16th century is to tell Martin Luther’s story; to tell it of the recovery of the Gospel in the 18th century is to tell the story of the Wesleys, Whitefield, and Edwards. And I have no doubt that when the story of the rise of the church in China – of which we heard a most interesting report this past Wednesday – comes to be written, it too will be the story of men whom God raised up to preach his Word, to minister his grace to his people, to lead them in worship, and to inspire and nerve them to serve Him in a hostile world.

Now, if I were preaching this evening to a group of ministers or seminarians, I would have much to say about their responsibility for the spiritual life of God’s people. But preaching as I am largely to a lay audience, the message is a different one. You must hear what the Lord says at the end of chapter 29 and you must accept and believe that what he says there – and in so many other places in Holy Scripture – is true for you as surely as it was true for Israel in the wilderness. Your life and the life of your children, your prosperity and theirs, the spiritual possibilities of your lives and the lives of your children will be determined to a very great degree by the ministers they have. If God is to be their God in the following generations, instrumentally speaking, it will be faithful ministers who make it so, faithful worship services and faithful preaching.

You cannot be indifferent to this question. The church must make demands of her ministers and must insist that those demands be met. She must insist on faithful men, on well-trained and able men, on men of gifts and graces. The church should not stand for a moment for a seminary that undermines a seminarian’s confidence in the Word of God or his loyalty to the faith once delivered to the saints. The willingness of great churches to be led into ruin by unfaithful divinity schools is one of the tragic stories of 20th century Protestant Christianity.

But if the church is to insist on faithful men for her ministers, she must produce them in the first place. It is all very well to complain that the seminaries aren't producing the right sort of ministers. That can sometimes be the case. But no seminary can make up for a lack of able men who are spiritually prepared for the work of the ministry. It is to love our own souls and the souls of our children to care that we are growing up young men for this work: young men who have the biblical and theological knowledge, the commitment to Christ and his cause, and who have acquired the crafts of thinking and speaking to good effect.

In the Reformed tradition, there are two very different theories of a divine call to the ministry. The one holds that no young man ought to consider himself called to the ministry unless he can't imagine himself doing something else. The other holds that every young Christian man should consider himself called to the ministry until he is persuaded that he is not. The question is difficult.

But this is easy: every church should certainly think that it is failing at a point of capital importance, that it is making a fatal error if it is not producing men capable of being faithful, fruitful Christian ministers. It must be part of how we evaluate ourselves as a congregation. It must be something we care about. It has more to do with how the future will unfold in the church of God – and so in the lives of unnumbered Christians – than almost anything else. And we have Yahweh's own word for that, here at the end of chapter 29.

“So I will consecrate...Aaron's sons to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God.”