

Every Believer is a Minister

By Geoff Volker, Revised and expanded by Steve Lehrer

Most people don't give a second thought to the way church is done. They say, "We have 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. In this article I want to put 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 the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a family of believers. When I write the word "family" I mean that in the most intimate sense of the word. 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 10:11-18 the author of Hebrews (whoever he was) describes the saving work of Jesus Christ as the New Covenant. He begins by contrasting the ineffective work of the Levitical priests with the effective work of Christ:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool (Hebrews 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 for those they represented.

But Christ purchased more than simply the forgiveness of sins: "because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Hebrews 10:14). This verse gives a description of the two things that Christ purchased for all those He represented. First he speaks again of the forgiveness of sins that makes the believer "perfect" in God's sight. We call this justification. He also refers to believers 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 through 18:

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts¹, and I will write them on their minds." Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:15-18).

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, God-loving people of God; it was never intended by God to produce a people of real believers:

For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord (Hebrews 8:7-9).

When you read the passage above, it is hard to miss the fact that there was something wrong with the Mosaic Covenant. But this is a bit shocking if you stop and think about it. Didn't God make this covenant? We know that God is perfect and doesn't make mistakes.² He was the author of the Mosaic Covenant.³ God is perfect and yet that which He made is not perfect. How can we understand this passage without doing damage to the character of God? Here is what I propose: The Old Covenant was just as God desired it to be and *from that point of view* it was perfect. But, from the point of view of 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 it was unable to make a people 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 sins and love for God.

But should we really characterize the Israelites as an unfaithful people, or were they like we are today which is a people who love God but struggle with sin? As a whole, the nation of Israel was an unbelieving people. They were God-haters rather than God-lovers. Let's look at some major evaluative statements about the Israelites at pivotal points in their history. At the end of Moses' life and ministry he says a few words to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land:

For I know how rebellious and stiff-necked you are. If you have been rebellious against the LORD while I am still alive and with you, how much more will you rebel after I die! Assemble before me all the elders of your tribes and all your officials, so that I can speak these words in their hearing and call heaven and earth to testify against them. For I know that after my death you are sure to become utterly corrupt and to turn from the

way I have commanded you. In days to come, disaster will fall upon you because you will do evil in the sight of the LORD and provoke him to anger by what your hands have made (Deuteronomy 31: 27-29).

These words are an evaluation of Moses' experience with Israel and his prediction for their future. Perhaps Moses had simply become a bit jaded. He was given a lot of responsibility and his life had been difficult. He wasn't allowed to enter the land for which he longed and he was about to die. Perhaps these were simply the impassioned ramblings of a bitter old man. The Israelites did, after all, enter the land of Canaan and have a measure of success.

When we turn to the book of 2 Kings when Judah is about to fall to the Babylonians we get a sweeping statement that confirms the validity of Moses' statement: "I will forsake the remnant of my inheritance and hand them over to their enemies. They will be looted and plundered by all their foes, because they have done evil in my eyes and have provoked me to anger from the day their forefathers came out of Egypt until this day" (2 Kings 21:14,15). Notice the scope of this statement. From the time of the Exodus and throughout their glorious history the Israelites could always be characterized as a people who did evil in God's eyes and provoked Him. 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 after God.

But we can't forget about the restoration period. The Israelites rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, the temple, and they began teaching the Word of God again. Did this restoration period mark a final return of a group of believers who struggled for generations to follow the God that they loved? Not according to Malachi who had the final word in the Old Testament about the Israelites: "Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them." (Malachi 3:7). The Israelites are once again given a sweeping evaluation of being unbelieving. They were characterized from their birth as a people until the last word of the final Old Covenant prophet as being a disobedient people. The Apostle John makes it very clear that we are to understand those who are characterized by disobedience to God as unbelievers: "The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4).

Of course I am not arguing that there were no real believers in the nation of Israel. I am only saying that Israel as a whole was unbelieving. There was always a tiny remnant of believers in Israel.⁴ But when the Old and New Testaments describe the nation of Israel as a whole, it is always described as unbelieving. Jesus himself points out Israel's unbelief:

When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:10-12).

Many theologians want to look back to the nation of Israel in the Old Covenant era as the church in the Old Testament. They look back to the gatherings of the Israelites and model their church practices after them. They have gatherings where the pastor gets behind the “holy desk” above the people and speaks the Word of God to the people as the prophets spoke to Israel. The people sit quietly while the prophet/pastor scolds them because they are so “stiff-necked.” I think this is an unbiblical way of coming up with a model for how the church is to function. 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. As I stated above, God did not make a mistake in constructing the Old Covenant as a covenant that could not save. He did not “slip-up” by making this covenant with the consistently rebellious Israelites. 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:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. **Now these things occurred as examples** to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry.” We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel. **These things happened to them as examples** and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come (1 Corinthians 10:1-11, *emphasis mine*).

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 look back to learn from the consequences of their sinful behavior and strive *not* to be like them.

So, when we look back to the Israelites in the Old Covenant era we do not see the church. The death of Jesus Christ purchased the church for God: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). The New Covenant states that everyone for whom Jesus died 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. A true believer who lived during the era of the Old Covenant would have met with fellow Israelites for worship, but he would have been in the distinct minority.⁵ He would have been a believer among unbelievers, a God-lover among God-haters. The professed

people of God, the nation of Israel, were only a picture of the true people of God. They were a rebellious people under a faulty covenant.

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. Therefore a proper profession of faith included not just a trust in Jesus Christ alone to save them, but also a desire to live for Jesus Christ. The evidence of the 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 also 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 were only professing to believe but were in reality God-haters.

It seems that most evangelical churches view the children of believers as an integral part of the church. Much time and energy is given over to entertaining and including them. But, in light of the New Testament teaching on the New Covenant, we would have to say that children of believers are not a part of the church unless they give evidence that they are participants in the New Covenant. Look at Hebrews 8:11 which speaks about those who are part of the New Covenant: “No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them 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.⁶ The common practice of gathering the children together and having them sing special music in the worship service for the purpose of leading the family of believers in worship is an unbiblical practice. If they are not believers, then they are not members of the New Covenant people of God and are not a part of the local church. They are a very important field for evangelism but they are not a part of the people of 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 (I 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 believers⁷ 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** (Ephesians 4:7, 10-16, *emphasis mine*).

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 more the elders will experience a lessening 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 getting at in Ephesians 4:16, "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." 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 in the church 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 of the believing men in the church 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 to 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. We have already laid the theological foundation for this above. It is the New Covenant (the work of Christ on the cross) that 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 Jesus 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 U.S. military goes through grueling and 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:

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7-11).

Every soldier in the Lord’s army is supernaturally trained to perform his vital function. He does not determine his function on his own, but should to seek to determine what God has given him⁸ 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, it is clear, then, that each believer has a specific role to fulfill in the body of Christ. It was not our idea to come to faith in Jesus Christ.⁹ It was not our decision that determined what gift the Spirit would give us.¹⁰ 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 the decision-making process, then Pandora's box will be opened and chaos will reign. They fear that fights will break out and that they might even cause a split in their church if they let the believers in on important church decisions. 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 (Romans 8:5-14). The Scripture describes each believer as having the "mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 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 seem 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.¹¹ 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 that he has 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.¹² Yet elders are a 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 Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, the High Priest of the New Covenant.

Conclusion: 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 if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6). We have learned above 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. You had to be a male in the tribe of Levi between 30 and 50 years of age and not disqualified by physical abnormalities. It was only these precious few that had

access to God in the sacrificial process. They had the “holy jobs” while the rest of God’s people simply hoped to be blessed by God through them.

In the New Covenant era, God guarantees that the 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: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

In the New Covenant community every individual knows God and represents Him in to the rest of the community. This means that every believer has a “holy job,” 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.

Author

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Endnotes:

¹ Many theologians, particularly covenant theologians, believe that the phrase “I will put them (my laws) on their hearts” in 8:10b refers to the Ten Commandments becoming innate knowledge for all believers. This issue is too comprehensive to address fully here, so I will simply state my position. I believe that this phrase simply refers to the fundamental motivation or desire that God gives to all believers to live for Him. The passage has nothing to do with intellectual knowledge of law or which laws the believer is to obey today. We hope to address this issue more fully in a future article.

² Ephesians 1:11

³ Exodus 31:18

⁴ Romans 9:27

⁵ Romans 9:27

⁶ Luke 9:23-25

⁷ Romans 15:14

⁸ He should seek to find out what his gift is by actually participating in different ministries within the body and talking with people in the body who have seen him in action to see if they think he has gifts in any particular areas.

⁹ Ephesians 1:4-5,11.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:11

¹¹ Ephesians 5:22-33

¹² Hebrews 13:17