

Ecclesiastical Authority – Deuteronomy 18:1-14

Introduction – Moses has discussed the authority of Judges and Kings in the civil realm. Now he moves to a discussion of the authority of ministers and prophets in the ecclesial realm. We'll take up the first half of that now.

The Authoritative Ministry of the Levites (vv1-8) – The LORD was their inheritance for they had been given on behalf of the firstborn as substitutes (vv1-2, Num 3:12-13). They were a necessary part of society and so they were to be provided for in order to “stand and minister in the name of the LORD” (vv3-5). This was to occur with the Levites who ministered directly in the local communities and those who went to serve in Jerusalem (vv6-8).

Ministers in Society – The ministry of the Levites was far more than their sacrificial work at the Tabernacle, all of which is subsumed in our New Covenant, once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Just as every society needs farmers (for food) and builders (for housing), so we need those who will instruct us in understanding and applying all of God's law. In fact, the Levites' broader ministry in the local towns entailed studying and teaching the law, teaching music, providing pastoral counsel, care, and spiritual judgments, and giving benedictions over the community (Lev 10:11, Num 6:26ff, Deut 10:8, 1 Chron 25:1-8, 2 Chron 15:3, Neh 8:7-8). Reading through the New Testament, especially Paul's Pastoral Epistles, we find that today's ministers have very similar responsibilities and authority.

To Stand and Minister – The word, *stand*, is a term used to describe a loyal and devoted servant who stood ready in the presence of his king or master, ready to serve the king's people according to the directions given. A Kingdom-culture sets aside qualified servants who will study the Word and bring it to bear for the people in all the complexities of life. His life is set aside from other vocational responsibilities that he might give himself to word and doctrine (1 Tim 5:17) and the souls for whom he will give an account (Heb 13:17).

The Christian Disciple – The minister, the preacher, the teachers, the elders, are not set aside for themselves, but because the Lord has something for His people. We are all disciples which means we are all students. Christianity of today is profoundly superficial (an oxymoron, for sure). Instead, led by our ecclesiastical authorities, we should be growing up, maturing, and becoming profoundly different people and a different community of people. And this is why the pattern of Levitical teachers was given to Israel and why we should model the same in New Covenant paradigms.

A Seductive Alternative (vv9-14) – There were competing, seductive, and abominable alternative authorities which Israel must avoid – and there is much to learn here as well. The polytheistic nations that surrounded Israel were given to all kinds of superstitious practices designed to discover the will of the gods or to compel those gods to action. Such practices are offensive to the LORD and harmful to us, seducing us even to child-sacrifice (v10). Included also is an abhorrence of witchcraft (seeking to magically determine a course of action), soothsaying (reading signs in stars, clouds, birds), an omen-interpreter (fortune-telling), sorcery or spell-casting, mediums, spiritists, and necromancers (calling up the dead).

Do Not Worry – The flesh longs to know and control one's future as well as the unseen world around us, for the flesh cannot trust in God's good Providence over all things. The flesh often wants more answers and solutions than God is going to give (Deut 29:29). Jesus warns us and instructs us as to how to avoid such fleshly indulgences (Matt 6:25-34). Today, instead of seeking first the kingdom of God, Christians are often seduced into seeking all kinds of snake-oil solutions, pagan counseling methods and therapies, and Jesus-hating educational systems for themselves and their children.

The Rise of Occultism – Our culture has seen a rise in occultism in recent generations as the doctrine of God's sovereignty has been more and more rejected, and our “levites” have not responded with faithful teaching, correction and wisdom. It is important not to think you are bullet-proof from dabbling in witchcraft; we are influenced, often subtly, by what we read and watch far more than we are willing to admit – because the flesh loves it.

The Victory of the Cross in Culture – At the same time, we must not be superstitious about “words” or “traditions” and where they come from. Wodensday, birthday candle blowing, wedding rings, and the like, do not need to be discarded en masse when it is clear that Christendom has utterly defeated these rituals and their gods. In addition, there is a profound difference between what C.S. Lewis is doing with Aslan and his magic as opposed to the pagan worldview in the video game you might be playing. If you can't tell, you need wisdom – and that is what faithful instruction is for.

You Shall Be Blameless (v13) – This can also be translated “*You shall be perfect*” and is the idea that Jesus reiterates in His discussion of the law in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:48). We are told that Noah was perfect (Gen 6:9) and Abraham was called to be perfect (Gen 17:1). David declares that He will walk in a perfect way (Psalm 101:2). In both the Old and New Covenant, what this was teaching is related to the subject at hand. In order to be perfect, one has to be found in covenant with God, which is by faith; and one has to be maturing in that covenant with God, which is also by faith. This is not a call to a perfectionistic pietism. It is a call to Christ, to His finished work imputed to you, and the ministry of His Holy Spirit through His church (Word and sacrament) to equip, train, encourage, console, edify, renew, mature, and in the end, bring you to glorification in Him – all by grace, all through faith – but all and only through Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest.