

# The Church: Restored to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation

(Heb. 13:8-16, Ex. 19:5-6)

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**Introduction:** “Carnival” is in full swing these days, historically characterized as a period of intense flamboyant celebration as well as a high degree of permissiveness and fleshly indulgence. Preceding the Lenten season, it’s like a burst of wild energy just before the time of penance and spiritual reflection required by the Roman church during the 40 days leading up to Easter. But the festivities and parades of Carnival are also commonly associated with pagan rituals from many earlier cultures. What should a Christian’s response be?

- First is the recognition that Christians are not better than anybody else, and Jesus is our example here. He put Himself totally on our human level rather than elevating Himself above us. He humbled Himself again and again, which is the same lesson the Holy Spirit tries to teach us, so that we don’t look with judgmentalism on those whose lifestyle is different from ours. We owe every human being love and respect, no matter how different they may be from us, because in fact, we all share a sin nature that’s equally lost and subject to corruption. That’s why we may even feel a twinge of jealousy or envy when we see the revelers of Carnival, thinking that somehow we’re “missing out on all the fun.” Review that attitude carefully! Scripture says, “You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound” (Ps. 4:7); and “Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked” (Ps. 84:10).

- To make sure we persevere in that attitude, God in Christ is restoring our lives for the service of the “priesthood.” Just a minimal background check on the priesthood in the Old Testament reveals that it was a lot of hard work! It was a service and privilege that the descendants of Aaron performed on behalf of the Israelites. In Num. 18:7 it’s described as a gift from God to the descendants of Aaron, whose role was to act as intermediaries between God and the people, ministering at the altar and in the sanctuary, offering the sacrifices. Yet God already had the vision of ALL His people serving in the priestly role: “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a **kingdom of priests** and a **holy nation**” (Ex. 19:5-6). The collective role of Israel was to serve as priests between God and rest of humanity, intermediaries of God’s love, truth, and peace to the nations!

- In the New Testament, we find this same role ascribed to the church: “you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ ... But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, to proclaim the virtues of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:5, 9; cf. Rev. 5:10). This is the basis of the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers! The church has this task of making clear to the world Who is the true Lord and just how marvelous He is! Heb. 13:8-16 spells it out with even greater clarity:

**1)** vv.8-9: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.”

- Jesus is our fixed reference point, never changing! So we shouldn’t be susceptible to “strange teachings.” In other words, variety and novelty are NOT of interest when it comes to feeding your soul! Stay with what is tried and proven. Stay with what’s trustworthy. There’s plenty of diversity and freshness in the teaching of Scripture without seeking your nourishment in unreliable sources!

- Our heart is best strengthened (confirmed, sustained, established) “*by grace*,” which has been described with the acrostic “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.” So the writer to the Hebrews is first exhorting his readers to find their inner strength through what God has done for us in Christ, rather than by returning to the temple sacrifices, from which the worshiper was allowed to eat a portion, though in reality it offered no benefit or advantage to the participant. We can apply that to us in a similar way: when stressed or anxious, we may also try to nourish our heart on physical food, but it doesn’t work! We have to learn to feed our heart on grace!

- The message of grace is found all through Scripture, for example, in Jn. 1:14 (“the Word became flesh ... full of grace and truth”); Eph. 2:8-9 (“By grace you are being saved through faith ...”); 1 Cor. 15:10 (“By the grace of God I am what I am”); 1 Pe. 4:10 (“... serve one another as good stewards of God’s varied grace”); Rom. 6:14 (“Sin will have no dominion over you since you are not under law but under grace”); 2 Cor. 8:9 (“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich”); 2 Cor. 12:9 (“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”); Heb. 4:16 (“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”). This message of God’s favor needs to be personalized, applied to your situations, so that you bask in it and nourish your soul on it! It will reinforce your sense of who you are in Christ and the priesthood that He has called you to fulfill on behalf of those around you.

**2)** vv.10-14: “We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”

- This “altar” is an allusion to the Old Testament altar, where the priests were continually making sacrifices – for sin, for atonement, thanksgiving and worship. But the carcasses of sacrificed animals (whose blood was sprinkled in the Holy Place) were taken outside the camp of Israel, regarded as unclean. In the New Testament, the “altar” of sacrifice was obviously the cross, and it was also “outside the camp”; in other words, the place of crucifixion outside the city of Jerusalem was considered a place of uncleanness. According to Hebrews, the sacrifice ritual of removing those carcasses outside the gate typologically foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ “outside the camp” in a place of defilement and contamination. Anyone banished to that place of refuse, disease, dung, and death was being excluded, ostracized, and disgraced. So our Savior, the Holy One, was also taken outside the gate, the Gracious One was “disgraced,” that He might bear our shame and brokenness in the place of condemnation and rejection, but He bore it with radical dignity: forgiveness, kindness, patience, longsuffering, and love.

- So just as Christ was made to suffer outside the camp, these Hebrew readers were also urged to go “outside the camp,” instead of returning to the old altar, not even continuing in the fellowship of the synagogue, because they were called to bear the same reproach as Christ, abandoning the established fellowship and ordinances of Judaism in order to follow the true way. Since Jesus’ suffering was to “sanctify” us and set us apart for the work of being “a HOLY nation,” followers of Christ seek a city that is to come rather than expecting some earthly city to satisfy our hearts. Being “expelled from the earthly Jerusalem” could mean for us to abandon the search for an “earthly paradise” such as our world tries to set up by human standards and effort.

- In fact, Christians may even find themselves alienated from the earthly church as it becomes more and more apostate. Some sectors of the church are moving toward becoming as unholy as the world, adopting more and more of its standards. The Church of England, whose General Synod on Feb. 15 rejected a report issued in Jan. by the house of bishops reaffirming church canon on marriage: The bishops sought to provide a Scriptural framework for addressing issues related to human sexuality, marriage, and the church. But the general body voted not to “take note” of the bishops’ report. Debate highlighted the huge divide over same-sex relationships that continues to embroil the Church of England. Archbishop (of Canterbury) Justin Welby said, “To deal with that disagreement, to find ways forward, we need a radical new Christian inclusion in the Church ... which must be founded in Scripture, in reason, in tradition, in theology ... based on ... a proper 21<sup>st</sup>-century understanding of being human and of being sexual.” You have to wonder how the good bishop of Canterbury intends to base the new way forward on Scripture AND on a 21<sup>st</sup>-century understanding of sexuality! The two are diametrically opposed, so they’ll be pretty tough to reconcile.

- The truth is that Christian inclusion has always been “radical” – every sinner in the world is included in the invitation to come to Christ – it’s the invitation we’re called to enflesh as priests! But the invitation is to bow to a new Lord, to be made new in Christ and enter a new kingdom where sin no longer reigns over our mortal bodies, to be rescued from our old nature and all its self-centered criteria, so that the old passes away and the new comes!

- Scripture is our only norm for defining the new, not modern culture. Scriptural truth does not pass away. God is graciously ready to receive whosoever will come! You can’t beat that for inclusion! The Fall affected us all – we are all broken people. But none of us is beyond the transformative power of God. We’re being restored by grace so we can become channels of grace! It doesn’t matter what your problem has been or how degraded your life may have become by sin and the selfish pursuit of your own satisfaction. Nothing can compare with God’s

grace – I'd be a wreck without it! And we're being restored so we can be channels of that same graciousness to others.

- Will the world come to know Jesus if we compromise the message of Scripture? If we deviate from the Bible, can we count on the Holy Spirit's undergirding and empowering our witness? We are being pressured on every side to shut up about sexual sin, to let well enough alone, to become politically correct. And if we follow the cultural pressures, we will allow our children to be led down the broad path that leads to destruction, and we'll be left with an eviscerated gospel that has no power to save (what Paul referred to in Galatians as "anathema"). So we set our eyes on the coming Kingdom, and we devote our hearts to being made holy like Christ and to the priestly work God has commended to us in His name.

**3)** vv.15-16: "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

- These verses again refer to the universal priesthood of all believers, meaning every believer can offer these:

**a)** the "sacrifice of praise" refers to our worship, proclaiming the virtues of Jesus, as well as our prayer and intercession, confessing His name over every need and circumstance, exalting the Name above every name. But this verbal witness cannot stand alone; it must be accompanied by another type of sacrifice;

**b)** the sacrifice of loving actions that go with and honor that Name: doing good and sharing what you have with others (Greek *koinonía*, to have in common). These are the sacrifices pleasing to God – when we act on behalf of others, seeking to be a blessing. We don't become a blessing by trying harder, but by admitting our own brokenness, so that we run to the Savior and become saturated with His love. He's the real blessing and Source of all blessing. As I go deeper with Him, He makes my life a blessing – from my most intimate concentric circles outward. According to Ps. 63:3 and 73:28, He is the highest good in life, higher than my most treasured dreams.

**Conclusion:** Paul's deep longing was to be poured out like a drink offering on behalf of the faith of others (Php. 2:17, 2 Tim. 4:6). As we grow in serving as "priests," our very lives become part of the "sacrifice," in imitation of our great High Priest, who was poured out like a drink offering for us. So that's how we follow the example of Christ, by being "poured out" on behalf of the faith of others.