

Pastor's Corner – 5-18-2019 – The Laity of All Believers

*“Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”*

*“Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us.” – Mark 9:38-40*

What an interesting exchange between John and Jesus. John was concerned that some unauthorized individual was out there preaching and healing in Jesus name. This guy wasn't part of the inner circle of disciples. He didn't have the right credentials. Probably hadn't even attended seminary. Who was he, to be out there casting out demons? We can't have just anybody out there running around in Jesus' name doing this stuff unsupervised.

I'm sure the apostles thought they were doing the right thing when they put a stop to this guy's errant ministry. They figured they had done a good thing by reigning him in. They had imposed order and enforced structure in the fledgling movement. No independent ministries for us, thanks very much.

The picture we are seeing is that the apostles totally misunderstood the nature of the kingdom of God. They thought the kingdom was about rulership, being in charge, and control. They fought amongst themselves about who would be in charge. They tried to stop others who might be infringing on their territory. It's all about being in control and calling the shots.

Of course, that wasn't Jesus' perspective. The kingdom of God isn't about who's in charge or who's calling the shots. In fact, as this story shows, God is no respecter of persons. He doesn't care who's ordained, who's on salary, or who has a degree in theology. If he wants to give some random guy the ability to cast out demons – well, that's what he's going to do. All that really matters is that the kingdom of God expands and can use whoever he wants to expand it.

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers encapsulates this idea. This doctrine suggests that every believer is designated a priest in God's kingdom. As such, every believer has direct access to God (through Jesus), has the ability to intercede for others, and has a responsibility to work on behalf of the kingdom. The mystery-man performing exorcisms understood that dynamic, the apostles did not.

While the priesthood of all believers was the ideal, somewhere along the way it got lost. Instead of a priesthood of all believers, the church created a system where only a special class of highly trained and educated men could serve as priests. During the middle ages a huge gulf was created between clergy and laity. The professionals were in charge of conducting worship, administering sacraments and delivering saving faith to the non-professionals. The clergy/laity divide created a system of spiritual producers and consumers where the professionals were expected to do all the ministry work and everyone else was expected to buy their product.

Fast forward to today and we still hold onto the clergy/laity distinction created in the middle ages instead of the priesthood of all believers created in the New Testament. We seem to have the mindset of the apostles when they wanted to control who could preach and who could cast out demons. We still struggle with issues of supremacy and who can be in charge (or not). And beyond that, we still tend to expect the paid professionals to be the ones to make things happen when it comes to church.

I would like to challenge that paradigm and suggest that God does *not* intend for pastors and paid church leaders to be the ones doing the bulk of the spiritual work in a church. He does not intend for the paid professionals to be the gate-keepers that determine what can and can't be done. In Eph. 4:11 it says that God gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry. In other words, the clergy are responsible for coordinating the work that the church will do and helping to equip the church to do it well. The church (ie the people in the pews) are the ones who actually do the work of the ministry.

I recognize that this does happen to an extent. Sabbath school teachers teach their classes without any input from the pastor. Small group leaders can lead without some paid professional looking over their shoulder all the time. Ministry leaders are expected to lead their ministries. Where I find that we tend to fall into the old model is when it comes to creating something new. Pastors are expected to be the initiators and organizers for any new endeavor in the church. And, quite often, if the pastor doesn't have a vision/passion/proficiency for a certain kind of ministry, well it's just not going to happen.

That's a shame, because the church would certainly benefit from the ideas and the pro-active ministry efforts of the people in the pews. Why wait for the pastor to organize something if God has laid a burden on your heart? Why not just run with it? That's what the guy in Mark 9 did. Apparently, he heard Jesus preach or saw him cast out demons and realized, "hey I've got to get in on this!" He didn't ask permission if he could become a preacher. He just went out and did it.

If we always wait for the designated clergy to initiate everything we will never reach the full potential that God has for us. Some highly gifted pastors may be able to juggle a whole lot of ministries and create a myriad of opportunities to get involved, but most pastors (like me) are just average with that kind of thing. There may be a couple areas where a pastor excels but there are few that excel in all ministry areas.

That's where the priesthood of all believers comes in. If you have a burden for a prayer meeting/ministry – start one. Don't wait for the board or the elders or the pastor to start it for you. If you feel like our elderly shut-in members aren't getting enough attention – get together with a few friends and start visiting. If you feel like the church needs to be passing out pamphlets on the street, or praying at people's front doors, or feeding the homeless, or whatever, don't wait for someone else to organize it for you. You are a priest in the kingdom of God. Jesus is your head. If he has given you permission, go for it (maybe run it by the elders or board first, as a courtesy).

I believe the church will never reach its fullest potential until we all start to function as God ordained ministers. This will make some of us uncomfortable. It might seem like anarchy – everyone doing their own thing. But I would point us back to the words of Jesus when the apostles encountered the mystery exorcist – "do not stop them." Jesus is in control. Let's trust him to lead his church and if he leads you to pioneer a new ministry then go ahead and get to it. Don't wait for someone else to do it for you.

Happy Sabbath  
Pastor Tyler