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CHURCH WORKER FOR WHOSE SAKE?

Today's text: Numbers Chaps. 3-4; Acts 6: 1-6

Extracts:

1. **“And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister unto him. And they shall keep his charge, and the charge of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of the congregation, to do the service of the tabernacle”** [Num. 3: 5-7]
2. **“And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word”** [Acts 6: 1-4]

*In our last lesson, we saw how the army of God was selected from eleven out of the twelve tribes of Israel. The tribe of Levi was left out for a purpose, which will become clearer in today's lesson. In Chapters 3 and 4 of the book of **Numbers**, God showed Moses how to organize the Levites to serve as “church workers,” that is, those who would minister to the priests and the congregation in the house of God.*

As we shall soon see, God considers church work a very important aspect of the salvation ministry. The Levites were specially chosen, and carefully trained. God provided for their welfare so that they could pay full attention to their work. Their duties were well spelt out, and all such duties pointed to the fact that their work was to edify the church and glorify God. Unfortunately, however, some of the Levites had motives other than for God's sake. They did unholy things in the house of God for which they were heavily punished.

In the modern church, many church workers are quite dedicated to their work. However, we all know from experiences in our respective places of worship that all is not well with some of them. We hear of cases of dereliction of duty, embezzlement of church funds and immoral relations with the congregation. One is forced to ask whether such church workers have other motives than what God expects of them. This is the main issue we shall examine in today's lesson.

1. Who are the Levites?

The Levites were the descendants of Levi, the third son of Jacob by his first wife, Leah [Gen. 29: 31-34]. You will recall that, during Jacob's family's journey back to Canaan, his daughter by Leah, Dinah, was defiled by Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite [Gen. 34: 2]. Her brothers, Simeon and Levi, were so incensed that they killed a great number of the Hivites, including Shechem and his father, and seized their valuables. Jacob felt sad about their action and told both Simeon and Levi, "Ye have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land..." [vv. 25-30].

On his deathbed years later, Jacob called all his sons to tell them "what shall befall you in the last days" [Gen. 49: 1]. On Simeon and Levi, he prophesied, "instruments of cruelty are in their habitations... for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self will they digged down a wall... *I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel*" [vv. 5-7]. How was this prophecy fulfilled? In the case of Simeon, there was a high death rate among soldiers drawn from his tribe. Between the first census of the army of Israel [Num. 1:2-3] and the second [Num. 26: 2], the total size of the army dropped by a mere 0.3% [from 603,550 –Num. 1:46- to 601,730- Num. 26:51]. However, that of the tribe of Simeon dropped significantly by 37% [from 59,300- Num. 2:13- to 22,200- Num. 26:14].

In the case of the tribe of Levi, "they were not numbered among the children of Israel, because *there was no inheritance given them among the children of Israel*" [Num. 26:62]. Remarkably, this tribe that was denied inheritance was the one chosen by God to take charge of His house! Moses, Aaron and Eleazar [Num. 26:59, 63], the parents of John the Baptist, Zacharias and Elisabeth [Lk 1:5], and the mother of Jesus, Mary, the cousin of Elisabeth [Lk 1:36], all came from the tribe of Levi! For us, that means that, by virtue of our relationship with Christ by faith, church workers in the modern church are also Levites!

2. The spiritual significance of being a Levite

The following aspects should be noted:

a) *Election*

God told Moses, "I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn that openeth the matrix among the children of Israel; *therefore the Levites shall be Mine* [Num. 3:12]. When the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron on account of their preeminent position among the people, God commanded Moses to write the names of persons on twelve rods (one per tribe) and lay them before the tabernacle of witness, and "the man's rod, whom I shall choose, shall blossom, and I will make to cease the murmurings of the children of Israel" [Num. 17:1-5]. The following day, "the rod of Aaron for the house

of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds” [v. 8].

The call to duty in God’s temple is a divine calling, not just a mere administrative convenience. We are chosen by God to serve as church workers even though it was the decision of the church board [by whatever name it is called]. Stephen and Philip were among the seven deacons selected by the “multitude of the disciples.” The apostles prayed for them and laid “their hands on them” [Acts 6:2,5-6].

b) *Consecration*

Having taken the place of the firstborn who were “hallowed unto” God [Num. 3:13], the Levites had also become hallowed, that is, consecrated or set apart. To underline this point, God told Moses, “And thou shalt separate the Levites from among the children of Israel: and the Levites shall be Mine. *And after that shall the Levites go in to do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation: and thou shalt cleanse them, and offer them for an offering*” [Num. 8:14-15].

This instructs us that church workers must be “men [and women] of honest report, *full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom*” [Acts 6:3]. They must be holy because where they work is holy ground [2 Chron. 5:13-14].

c) *Representation*

Having been assigned the duties of representing the congregation before God, nobody else could take their place without inviting punishment to themselves. For example, Uzziah, a king of Judah who reigned for 52 years [from age 16] had become swollen headed. One day, he felt that he could take over the work of the priests and Levites. He went into the temple to “burn incense upon the altar of incense.” Azariah and the other priests tried unsuccessfully to restrain him. Immediately, God struck him with leprosy. He was disgraced out of office and died a leper [2 Chron. 26:1-21].

The Levites were broken into three main family lines with specific responsibilities as follows:

- ❑ The *Gershonites* were in charge of maintaining the furnishings of the tabernacle of the congregation [Num. 3: 21-26; 4: 21-28];
- ❑ The *Kohathites* were in charges of the ark, the table and the altars, the candle stick and the vessels of the sanctuary [Num. 3:27-32; 4: 1-20];
- ❑ The sons of *Merari* were in charge of the engineering works: “plumbing”, building maintenance, etc. [Num. 3:33-37; 4:29-33].

In summary, we see that the Levites represented the congregation in performing worship and administrative duties. Their worship duties later included music [1 Chron. 25:1-7] and preceding the army in battle [Josh. 6:4-5; 2 Chron. 20:19-21]. Administratively, they helped with collecting funds [2 Chron. 13:9] and distributing tithes [2 Chron. 31:11-19].

d) *Inheritance*

The Lord told Aaron, “Thou shalt have no inheritance in their land, neither shalt thou have any part among them: *I am thy part and thine inheritance among the children of Israel.*” Consequently, God added, “but the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer as an heave offering unto the Lord, *I have given to the Levites to inherit*” [Num. 18:20-26].

From the above, we learn that the church worker’s inheritance is in God, and that he/she is entitled to financial support from the church to meet his/her earthly needs. That is what Paul has talked about when he wrote, “Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should *live of the gospel*” [1 Cor. 9:14]. However, for fear of the polluting power of money, Paul added that he did not charge anything so “that I abuse not my power [i.e., privilege] in the gospel” [v. 18].

3. Temptations to avoid

Who are church workers? Let us list them again:

- ✓ The full-time priests who are now in the place of Aaron and his descendants;
- ✓ Full or part-time employees of the church doing pastoral and administrative duties, who are now in the place of the Levites. They include junior ministers, choir masters/mistresses, administrative/professional staff, etc.
- ✓ Volunteers who may be retired priests and other church workers who are in the place of retired Levites [50 years and above-Num. 8:25-26].

Church workers are human beings who have their own personal needs and problems. Some of them are married with children. Even those who are not married may have extended family obligations. Yet, we expect them to meet the needs of the congregation, some of whom are so conniving and manipulative, so proud and selfish! Consequently, church workers face a good number of temptations, some of which are as follows:

a) *Legalism versus trivialization*

Worship has two aspects: the rituals and their essence. For example, most people close their eyes when they pray, apparently to be able to concentrate. But they can also concentrate without closing them. After all, Jesus prayed with His eyes wide open [Jn 11:41]! In every church, there

are rules on what is proper conduct [e.g., mode of dressing, praying postures, sitting arrangements, etc.]. What should the church worker do if visitors or fellow worshippers do not meet those requirements? To insist on the right thing may soon degenerate into legalism, that is, paying more attention to rituals than their essence. On the other hand, to ignore or permit any breach may soon radically affect the tradition or culture of that church, if not of proper conduct or even the essence, which can amount to trivializing worship. For example, God struck dead inside the temple Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, for burning incense made from wood not prescribed by God [Num. 3:2-4]. So, the church worker is always striving to promote congregation-friendly practices without sacrificing true worship.

b) *Misconduct*

In the process of doing their work, priests and other church workers have to interact with the congregation and other people. A great deal of misconduct has been reported out of such interactions. Here are some examples:

□ Immorality

In almost every Christian denomination, there is today an epidemic of sexual immorality of every description [fornication, adultery, sodomy, etc] between church workers and vulnerable members of their congregation. Major scandals have been reported already. That such transgressions have not been discovered or reported in your church does not mean that they are not occurring. In due season, we shall all know!

The problem is not new. Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, "lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation" [1 Sam. 2:22]. In spite of warnings from God through prophets, they continued in their immoral acts [vv. 27-34]. Consequently, both of them died on the same day while they were on pastoral duties [1 Sam. 4:11].

That is the reason that church workers need to be filled with the Holy Spirit, like Stephen and Philip, so that they can resist temptation.

□ White collar criminality

Some church leaders and workers have been jailed for cooking church accounts to cover up stealing of church funds. There are many "small thieves" who may never be caught [by human authorities, of course, because God sees them all the time!]. They are taking gifts and inducements to recommend junior ministers or workers for elevation to higher positions. Some are lying and

conniving to attain higher status. Some are using nepotism [like family or ethnic connections] rather than spiritual calling to assign key positions to their wards or *protégés*. Samuel tried to appoint his sons, Joel and Abiah, to succeed him as judges but the people rejected them because “they walked not in his ways, but turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment” [1 Sam. 8:1-2].

4. Conclusion: Church workers for God’s sake!

For God’s work to be effectively done, we need church workers who are Spirit-filled and *motivated*. For example, Paul could take care of himself. However, when the Philippians sent him gifts, he was so effusive with praise: the fragrance “of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing to God.” Then, he went on to pray for them the now popular prayer, “But my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” [Phil. 4:18-19].

Every church has a responsibility to take the motivation of church workers as seriously as possible so as to create for them an *enabling environment* to perform their pastoral and administrative duties to the glory of God. Whether we admit it or not, church work is a job. Therefore, like employees working for enlightened employers, the church should make sure that the employment conditions [pay, welfare, safety and health, etc] are motivating and competitive. The employee should have the confidence that the church is interested in his/her welfare and that of their families. Members of the congregation should be conscious that the church workers have physical and emotional needs, which they can also meet. See what certain women, including Mary Magdalen, Joanna and Susanna, did for Jesus, “which ministered unto Him *of their substance*” [Lk 8:2-3]. Jesus received so much that He made a thief, Judas Iscariot, His treasurer [Jn 12:6]!

On their own part, church workers should realize that “whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption, but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting” [Gal. 6:7b-8]. Stephen was a church worker but he became the first martyr for Christ [Acts 7:59]. Therefore, no matter how the church treats them, they should look up to their higher calling of the “crown of righteousness” which only Jesus Christ can give [2 Tim. 4:8].

Let us all be church workers only for God’s sake.