

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR THE MINISTRY OF THE LAITY

Since creation it has been God's desire to have fellowship with man. Sin began in the Garden of Eden, and fellowship with God was broken. Since that time, God has been making Himself known to people in various ways and at various times.

God Calls a Man: Abraham

God's call to Abraham is recorded in Genesis 12:1-3 while he was living in Haran:

Now the Lord had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen 12:1-3 NKJV)

Abraham responded to the call and left behind a civilization we now know to have been very great indeed. He was seventy-five years old at the time of his departure from Haran. He went out "not knowing where he was going" (Heb 11:8), and the only thing he knew for sure was that it was God who had called him.

The call was to leave behind everything which gave him any sense of identity and security. To leave behind the security of his home, the support of his family, and everything which was familiar required total dependence on God. God's only command to Abraham was simply to go and, the "*I will's*" reveal how much greater is the Lord's part. All that was required of Abraham was faith and obedience. Abraham believed God would fulfill His promise and was willing to be obedient.

Faith and obedience go together and neither can stand alone. This same truth is repeated in the New Testament. The writer of Hebrews states, "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb 11:6). James further emphasizes this truth by saying, "faith without works is dead" (Jas 2:26).

The same commitment is required today of all who would follow God. God was calling Abraham to leave his present way of life and turn his back on it forever. Those concerned with evangelism and missions would do well to remember the sacrifice expected when responding to the call of God. Jesus repeats the expectation in Matthew 10:37, "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me."

God's desire and purpose was, and continues to be, to restore fellowship with all the people of the earth. It was through Abraham that God would choose to channel His blessing. The basic call of Abraham can be understood as a privilege, but one must also understand it was a call to mission.

The call included the responsibility of accepting God's mission of reconciliation.

God's promise of a blessing so great that it would extend to "all the families of the earth" is Messianic and can be understood only in connection with the promised Savior. The promise of God to Abraham indicates that the Messiah is to emerge from the line of Abram. The call was not simply that God would make a great name for Abraham, but the promise was that he would be blessed by God that he might help others.

Abraham is called from a life of certainty to a life of uncertainty. He is called to a life of separation and sacrifice. The expectation that a Christian can be a blessing and receive the promises of God without sacrifice is as though Abraham had stayed at Ur, or at Haran, in the hope of converting the household out of which he was called. Without faithful obedience and sacrifice, there can be no effective ministry. One cannot know God without understanding His desire to be a blessing to all people and who God is cannot be separated from what God is about.

God did not call Abraham because he was perfect. On two different occasions, in Genesis 12 and 20, Abraham lies about Sarah being his wife. A man does not cease to be human because his story is told in the Bible. God has chosen to work through people and Abraham is a reminder that God can and will still use people if they are willing.

Abraham's faith was tested in Genesis 22 when God required the sacrifice of his only son Isaac. God told Abraham to take Isaac to Mount Moriah

and offer him as a burnt offering. In Genesis 21:12 God had said that Isaac was the son through whom his descendants would be called. Hebrews 11:17-19 reveals that Abraham believed that God could raise Isaac from the dead, if necessary, to fulfill the promise. Because Abraham believed God's promise he obeyed God's command. Belief in the faithfulness of God to His people is a major foundation of obedience and service. God did not test Abraham nor does He test us to increase His knowledge, but ours.

God spared Isaac by providing a ram for the sacrifice. As Abraham raised the knife to sacrifice Isaac, God called out "Abraham!, Abraham!" Even in a moment of mixed love, agony and sorrow, Abraham responded with a submissive "Here I am" (Gen 22:11). Abraham had passed the test of obedience and surrender. God repeats the covenant and again tells Abraham his descendants will bring blessing to all the nations.

The idea that nations will be blessed by his descendants appears again in Genesis 26:4 and Genesis 28:14. God chose the descendants of Abraham as a people to be the instruments of His universal redemptive purpose.

Abraham was able to see beyond each hardship and difficulty knowing that God's promise was sure. Hebrews 11:9-10 states, "By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." The example of Abraham and the example of Jesus in Hebrews 12:2 "who for the joy that was set before Him

endured the cross” is an encouragement to Christians who may have struggles. Evangelism and church growth will bring difficulty and hardships. Christians who claim the promises of God are able to see all that God has planned and will be able to endure the passing hardships.

God's covenant with Abraham was passed on to Isaac. After Isaac's birth, the first account of his life comes in Genesis 22 when he comes on the scene as a young man going with his father to offer a sacrifice. Knowing there was no sacrifice to offer, Isaac shows his love for his father and his faith in God. The servants were told to wait and “we will come back to you” (Gen 22:5).

Isaac has to his credit that he believed. Knowing there was no sacrifice, he allowed his hands to be tied in preparation to be sacrificed. As they climbed the mountain Abraham carried the knife and the fire. It was Isaac who carried the load of firewood. At this time Isaac was possibly eighteen to twenty years old. The strength of his youth would have allowed him to resist had he chosen to be disobedient.

Isaac was willing to sacrifice his life in obedience to his father and in submission to God. He has shown himself worthy to be regarded as a type of that Son who carried His cross up Mount Calvary.

God continues in His plan of redemption by repeating the covenant with Isaac's son Jacob. If Isaac is a man who started right and ended wrong, then Jacob is a man who started wrong and ended right. In the beginning of his life, there is little to like about Jacob. He is a sneak, a cheat and a momma's

boy. By the end of his life, God calls Himself “the God of Jacob.” (Exod 3:6).

God works in the lives of people to show that salvation is completely a matter of undeserved grace. Evangelism and church growth comes as a result of unworthy people responding to the grace of God and then sharing that grace with others.

Jacob cheats Esau out of his birthright (Gen 25:29-34). Then, with the help of his mother, he deceives Isaac and receives the blessing intended for Esau (Gen 27:19-29). When Esau discovers the treachery, he becomes angry and bitter and vows to kill Jacob (Gen 27:41). Rebekah sends Jacob to her brother Laban in Haran. Jacob never sees his mother again. God is gracious in forgiveness, but sin always has consequences. The sin of Jacob came at a high price.

After cheating his father and brother, Jacob flees Beersheba and goes north toward Haran. It was while running for his life because of sin that God spoke to him. In the hill country fifteen miles north of Jerusalem, he has nothing upon which to lay his head except a stone. Genesis 28 records that in the darkness and loneliness of that night, God sent down a ladder. No matter how dark the night, how deep the sin or how desperate the situation, God is always there providing a bridge and extending an invitation and expressing His desire for restored fellowship.

In Genesis 32: 22-32, God shows His divine patience as He comes to Jacob again and struggles with him all night. Jacob vows not to let God go until

He blesses him. The struggle left Jacob with a bad hip which stayed with him the rest of his life. But more than that, the struggle with God at Peniel left a mark on Jacob which he took to his grave. Those who have struggled with God and resolved not to let Him go have been changed for life. Jacob realized he had met God face to face and his life was forever changed. All who truly meet God experience a transformation. The blessings received from God will then be passed on to others. The foundation for the motivation for ministry is found in the conversion experience.

All who have truly been touched by God have been changed by God. Those who have received the blessings of God are called on to share those blessings with others who have needs.

Later, when Jacob received word from Joseph in Egypt and an invitation from Pharaoh to come to Egypt, God spoke to him in Genesis 46:3-4: "Do not fear to go down to Egypt for I will make of you a great nation there." Those last years were like a peaceful sunset at the close of a day of storm and tempest.

Joseph is also a part of God's plan of redemption. After Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers (Gen 37:26-28), God places Joseph in a position of authority which provides an opportunity to save his family. When famine came to Canaan, Joseph's ten brothers came to Egypt to buy grain (Gen 46:1-3). It had been over twenty years since they sold Joseph into slavery and now they stood before him in desperation. Now is his chance to get even, but godly

character prevails. Genesis 45:7 records Joseph's call, character and commitment: "God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth."

Joseph understood God's plan of deliverance. He understood God had called out the descendants of Abraham to be the people of God and to be a blessing to all the people of the earth. Prosperity did not cause Joseph to abandon his faithful obedience to God. Churches and individuals going through periods of struggle and great need constantly depend on God's blessing and provision. When growth takes place and finances become stable, there is a temptation to be distracted from the primary purpose of evangelism, ministry and church growth. Struggles and hardship are sometimes overcome by people who then find themselves brought down by prosperity.

Joseph believed the promises of God, and his last request before he died was a prophetic statement. He required his children to make an oath that they would take his bones to Canaan when they returned to claim the promised land (Gen 50:25).

There are lessons to be learned from God's call to the patriarchs to become the people of God. God did not call the patriarchs and make a covenant with them because of their goodness but because of His goodness. God did not call Abraham just to be Abraham or Isaac just to be Isaac or Jacob just to be Jacob. God called them to become "laos," the people of God. The people of God were not called just to be blessed but to be a blessing. The

people of God were not called to enjoy privilege without responsibility but to a privileged responsibility. God had kept His part of the covenant and the covenant with Abraham is interpreted by Deuteronomy as a covenant of election, and the events of the exodus, the making of the covenant on Mount Horeb, and the conquest of the land of Canaan, are all seen as fulfilling the declared intention of God.

God did not die with the patriarchs nor did His plan change with their death. God's plan is to bless those who will be a blessing. To respond to the call of God requires a commitment to missions and evangelism.

God Calls a People: Israel

Almost three months after leaving Egypt, the children of Israel came to the wilderness of Sinai and it is there that God makes a covenant with them and calls them to be His chosen people. The covenant is recorded in Exodus 19:5-8:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. 'And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel." So Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which the Lord commanded him. Then all the people answered together and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." So Moses brought back the words of the people to the Lord.

God promised to make Israel a royal and priestly nation who would be His special people above all the people of the earth. They readily accepted the offer by replying in verse 8: "all that the Lord has spoken we will do." God has

now made a covenant to fulfill His desire to restore fellowship with all the people of the world. This covenant may be the most important event of Exodus, and possibly of the Old Testament itself.

While hearing and accepting the blessing part of the covenant, Israel apparently never did fully understand the obedience part of the covenant or else chose to ignore it. It was a covenant of blessing which required a response on the part of the people. God was not to become theirs, but they were to become His particular and valuable possession. They were chosen to be a channel of God's blessings so that through them all the world would be blessed. God is faithful to keep His promises but is not bound to a covenant which is broken by rebellious and disobedient people. There is a danger that to accept the promise without the obligations would be to sink into complacency. It was Israel's refusal to accept responsibility which led to their downfall.

All that the Lord was doing for Israel was not because of their goodness but because of God's goodness. His blessing could not be earned. God was continuing His search for a channel of blessing whereby He would be able to restore fellowship with and bless all the people of the world. God was gracious in the privileges offered to Israel but the great privileges also imply great responsibility.

Israel accepted God as their own special treasure. They worshiped Him but they failed to become a kingdom of priests and to be "a blessing to all the families of the earth. In calling Israel to be a kingdom of priests, God

expected them to fulfill the priestly role.

In simplest terms, the two-fold responsibility of a priest is to represent God to the people and to represent the people to God. God's desire is to have fellowship with all people. Because of sin and rebellion, people who have been separated from God must be brought back to God. The people of God are to take the message of God's love and forgiveness to the people of the world. As representatives of God, His people were to go into the world and be a blessing to all the people.

The other responsibility is to represent the people to God. They were to intercede before God on behalf of the world. The needs of the poor and the oppressed were to be brought to God. The needs of the sick and hurting people were to be brought to God.

In taking God as their own special treasure, Israel forgot the people of the world and left the priestly functions to the priests. They had misunderstood the call of God and wanted to believe their relationship with God was unconditional. The first word of the covenant is "if" (Exodus 19:5). God's blessings for the nation of Israel was based on their willingness to accept the mission of ministry and reconciliation in the world.

Verse six states that the covenant is with all the people, not just its leaders or priesthood. Rather than separate themselves from the world, they were to go into the world to be a blessing. The purpose of God's many blessings toward Israel was that those blessings would overflow into the world.

They were to be a channel through which God could work. The blessings, and therefore the covenant, were directed to the whole nation, and not simply to one group or class of its members. Instead of passing the blessings on, the people of Israel chose to keep the blessings for themselves only.

God sends a message of warning and an indictment to His people through the prophet Isaiah. Their worship and sacrifices were not acceptable because they were not fulfilling the covenant.

"To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" Says the Lord. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats. "When you come to appear before Me, who has required this from your hand, to trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies- I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood."(Isaiah 1:11-15) NKJV

Verse 11 indicates God is not impressed with the abundance of sacrifices and is not pleased with even the size of the sacrifice. God goes on in verse 13 to call the sacrifices useless and a waste and tells the people not to bother bringing them anymore because He is not interested in ritualistic sacrifice. The generosity of the people exceeded the demands of the law and must have left them satisfied with the sacrifices. Surely they were surprised to learn God was not impressed. Perhaps they had forgotten that God had already said through the prophet Samuel "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" (1 Sam 15:22).

God goes on to say that the praying of the people had become a sin. The burning of incense was symbolic of the prayers, and the uplifted hands were the posture of prayer. In verse 15 God states “even though you make many prayers, I will not hear.” The people are praying but God is not listening.

God is offended by their worship. In verse 12 God refers to their attendance at the temple as simply to “trample My courts,” much like one would refer to a herd of cows. The called assemblies and special days such as the feast days and holy days bring the strongest expression of personal feeling from God: “My soul hates.” (Isaiah 1:14).

God is not interested in the abundance of their sacrifices. God is not listening to their prayers, and, God hates their worship. God is saying to Israel, “I hate them because this is not what I called you to be!” God makes His displeasure known and then gives the reason for His displeasure, “Your hands are full of blood.”

The people of God had been called out to be a blessing to the people of the world. Rather than be obedient and fulfill their mission, they believed God would be pleased with their ritualistic expression of worship and devotion to Him. The tragedy is the temple worshipers are not conscious of their condition. God’s intention was that they become a kingdom of priests and they had become a religious people.

Although it is Isaiah who gives the warning and delivers the indictment

to Israel, it is Ezekiel who gives a better understanding of the charge against Israel.

Now it came to pass at the end of seven days that the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore hear a word from My mouth, and give them warning from Me: "When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. "Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul."
(Ezekiel 3:16-19)

God had called Israel to go out into the world and bring sinners to a saving relationship and a restored fellowship with God. They were told to warn people of the consequences of wickedness and seek forgiveness from God. To the extent that they refused to be obedient, they were guilty of the blood of those who died in their sin.

The message of Ezekiel refers to a singular "man" and not to other nations or to humankind in general. The emphasis appears to indicate an individual responsibility and therefore a personal accountability. Ezekiel reminds us that what is seen in vision must be expressed in service. The responsibility was to warn the wicked of sin and impending judgement. Any indifference that fails to save a life is comparable to negligent homicide. From the beginning, God has indicated that everyone bears a personal responsibility to others. The people of God continue to bear responsibility for the lives of the people of the world.

The ministry of Ezekiel is not only prophetic but also comes at a time which proves to be an illustration of what God is trying to say to Israel. Ezekiel ministers during the time of the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile. He was among the captives taken to Babylon in 597 B.C.

God's message is a reminder of the covenant made with Israel. God had said "If you will obey," but the people had chosen to disregard the covenant and the result was separation from God and submission to the king of Babylon. God's blessing and protection were for those who would keep the covenant.

Once the message and blessing of salvation is entrusted to someone, he or she then becomes responsible and accountable to share with those who are out of fellowship with God. Those who have received the blessings of God are expected to share those blessings with people who are in need. In refusing to become a kingdom of priests, Israel rejected the covenant and rejected God's plan of redemption for the world.

The church can take no comfort "in the failure of the early covenant, but must herself stand before the same threat of rejection. Although God established the church to fulfill His mission of reconciliation, individual congregations are in danger of forfeiting those blessings by refusing to be a channel of those blessings.

God Calls All People: The Laos

Upon the rejection of the covenant by Israel, God moved on in His search for people who would be a channel of blessing and a new covenant was established. God's unfolding plan of redemption is continued with the coming of Jesus Christ the Messiah. God had prepared Israel for the coming of the Messiah as illustrated in the Passover (Exodus 12:23, 26-27), and in the sacrificing of animals for the atonement for sin (Leviticus 16:27). What becomes significant is that, because of Israel's disobedience, God must call out another group of people to fulfill his plan of redemption. The division of the Bible into the Old Testament and the New Testament is an example of the significance between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. God's plan and purpose does not change, but it is the people who are replaced.

In Matthew chapter 21 Jesus tells two parables concerning the kingdom of God. Beginning in verse 28 he asks the Pharisees about a man who had two sons. He told both to go and work in the vineyard. The first said he would not go but eventually went. The second said he would go but did not go. Jesus asked the Pharisees, "Which did the will of the father?" The son who said he would go, representing the nation of Israel, agreed to the responsibility but did not do the will of the father. The rebellious son, representing sinful people outside the will of God, had a change of heart and became obedient. The rebellious son did the will of the father regardless of the initial refusal.

Verse 32 is the summary verse and refers to the prostitutes and tax

collectors who believed. The teaching of the parable is that, in the kingdom, performance takes priority over promise.

The second parable is also about a vineyard. It is found in Matthew 21:33-39.

Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him.

This parable portrays a picture similar to that of Isaiah 5:1-7. A vineyard has been prepared along with a winepress and a watchtower. Israel was left simply to take care of the vineyard.

In this parable, God is the landlord and again the workers are the nation of Israel. There comes a time when a harvest is expected and the landlord calls for the fruits. There is a parallel between the parable and the covenant which God made with Israel. God had an expectation that Israel would be productive in being a kingdom of priests in the world. Instead, they separated themselves from the world and ignored or killed the prophets. In the parable, God had sent His servants who are killed and stoned. Finally, he sends his son thinking they would respect him, but they took him out and killed him.

Whereas the Old Testament prophets are described as servants,

Jesus is described as God's Son. Again, we see a progression of events and the continuity of God's covenant is also revealed, for the son followed in the path of the prophets before him.

Jesus then asks in verse 40, "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" Their answer in verse 41, though they are unwilling to acknowledge it, is an indication of their own judgement to come: "He will destroy those wicked men miserably," they replied, "and he will lease his vineyard to other tenants, who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." Without realizing the implications of their answer, they were so self-confident they refused to acknowledge that God moves on in His search for a people who will be obedient and fruitful. Their words were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem and the setting aside of the Jews in favor of the nations of the Gentiles.

The response of Jesus in verse 43 is, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit." With these words, the covenant with Israel comes to a close and a new covenant is established and the foundation for the Church is prepared. These words sealed the fate of the nation of Israel. This is one of the most pivotal, important, and significant verses in all the Bible.

With this statement, the promise of blessing and Israel's status as a kingdom of priests and God's chosen people comes to an end. It is this verse

which separates the Old Testament from the New Testament. For more than a thousand years Israel had an opportunity to fulfill the covenant but chose rather to disobey God. They had failed to understand God's covenant with them was conditional to their obedience in being a blessing to the people of the earth.

As the Chief Priests and Pharisees heard the response of Jesus, verse 45 states "they knew he was talking about them." Rather than repent or show any desire to obey the call of God, they began to plan a way to kill Jesus. Israel was to be put aside and the Kingdom for which they had waited so long was taken from them. They killed the servants and the son knowing who they were killing, and this was not done in ignorance.

In establishing the New Covenant, Jesus declares that the people of God will be those who will bear fruit in the kingdom of God. God calls a new Israel to be His chosen people. The purpose of the call does not change; it is only the people who change. God is looking for people who will be a channel of His blessings.

The demonstration of the love of Jesus is that the people of God are to meet people where they are and bring them to God. The Pharisees criticized Jesus for His association with sinners (Luke 7:34). The radical demonstration of the love of Jesus is that He loved sinners while they were still unlovable. The Pharisees accepted bad people after they became good. Jesus loved them while they were still sinners.

The New Israel is the church. God made the Old Covenant for the

purpose of calling out a people who would be a channel of blessing. That same purpose is to be accomplished by the church today.

In all likelihood, Peter was present when Jesus withdrew the kingdom of God from Israel and promised to raise up a nation which would bear fruit.

There was no doubt in Peter's mind about what Jesus meant. Peter wrote these words,

You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy. (1 Peter 2:5, 9, 10) NKJV

Peter was writing to New Testament Christians who were once "not a people but are now the people of God" simply because they have entered into covenant relationship with God. There is an implication that they are not Jewish in background but are the "people of God" because they are Christian.

It seems obvious "these words are applied by Peter to the Christian Church." Peter used the Old Testament figures of speech to declare that Christians now were fulfilling Israel's role and vocation. In the past, Israel had been the object of God's special affection, and this affection was now transferred to the Christian Church. The royal priesthood still has a two-fold responsibility, to "present God to the world and the world to God." The church is now the holy nation and the chosen people. The significance of verse 10 is that the church is

now called the people of God. Another way of stating this is, once you were nobodies but now you are the people of God.

The distinction of “God’s chosen people” was removed from Israel as a nation and God has withdrawn His kingdom from Israel and given it to the church. Under the New Covenant, Israel is no longer the people of God. The only opportunity a Jew has to become one of the people of God is through the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. For those who have eschatological views on the ultimate offer of salvation to the Jews, the current reality in the world is our present reality. The call of the people of God is to be what the Jews were originally called to be. The Pharisees understood what was happening.

The people of God are unique. They are not unique because they believe in God. They are not unique because of denominational affiliation. They are not unique because they are morally good. They are not unique because they are religious. They are unique only because they have been called to and have accepted a covenant relationship with God. In accepting the covenant relationship, one accepts a mandate, to be a blessing in the world and bring people to God. That alone is the unique characteristic which makes someone one of the people of God.

Peter refers to making spiritual sacrifices (1 Pet 2:5). The distinction is necessary because at the time of the writing, the temple in Jerusalem was still standing. After the death of Christ, there was no longer a need to offer a sacrifice in the temple. Christ was the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. Likewise, in

verse 5 Peter refers to Christians as a “spiritual house” rather than the temple. Rather than go to the temple at Jerusalem, this new house is spiritual because it is indwelt by God’s Spirit. The Holy Spirit has come to dwell in the heart of every believer and there is no longer a need to go the temple to meet with God or to offer sacrifices. Christ has removed the need for temple sacrifices.

The New Israel is called upon to go into the world and bring lost people to God. The mission for all those who claim to be the people of God is summarized in 2 Corinthians 5:18: “Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” Since fellowship has been restored and reconciliation has taken place between a Christian and God, every Christian has been given the ministry of reconciliation. The ministry of reconciliation is the ministry of the New Covenant.

Those who would live in the New Covenant should understand that it is not a new religion but a new relationship with God. Those reconciled to God become a new creation and there is a new order of relationships at work between God and us and between us and our fellow man.

The two responsibilities of the *Laos*, the people of God, out in the world are evangelism and ministry. The people of God have been commissioned to share the Gospel with lost people and to meet the needs of the people around us. If it is our privilege to appropriate the promise, then it is also our responsibility to accept the commission.

One question remains. If every Christian is expected to be involved in evangelism and ministry, what is the role of the pastor? The apostle Paul gives the answer in Ephesians 4:11-12, "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry." While the King James Version places a comma after "saints," the Greek text "does not give any support to putting a comma after saints. The emphasis is on "the diakonia," the ministry of the whole membership. The primary role of the pastor is to equip the saints. The emphasis in this Scripture is not dealing with leadership in the church but is emphasizing the role of the members of the church. The pastor is not exempt from the personal responsibility of ministry and evangelism; rather he joins with the congregation and then the entire church should be engaged in spiritual labor.

Verse 12 is used to signify the complete equipping of the saints for the work of ministry. The functional ministries and offices of the church were designed to prepare all the saints in mature development for the work of ministry. The people of God are called to do the work of God and must therefore be trained and equipped for their calling.

Since every Christian is a priest, the title of priest is never used by New Testament writers to refer to a select and special group of Christians. Priest never means clergy or a professional minister in the New Testament.

A major danger of the clergy/laity distinction is the temptation of the laity to presume that only paid clergy are required to be involved in ministry and

evangelism. Another danger is the use of the words “clergy” and “laity” serve only to propagate the distinction of roles. The terms should be used only to distinguish the differences and not to exacerbate the problem. To place one’s kingdom responsibilities upon another person is to violate the covenant.

While it may be true that all the laity may not be categorized as pastors, all pastors must do the work of the laity. The New Covenant requires all Christians, including pastors and laypeople, to be involved in evangelism and ministry. One common understanding of the word pastor is shepherd. If a pastor is the shepherd, the local church is a flock of sheep and it is his responsibility to feed and lead the flock.

The term “lay” is often used to suggest unprofessional or amateur qualifications. However, can be no higher qualification for life or for priesthood than to be part of the *laos*, the people of God, the chosen people.

The call of God is a call to become a channel of blessing and to be a minister of reconciliation. After the covenant was removed from Israel, God extended His invitation to all people. There is no higher privilege, and there is no greater responsibility than to be called “the people of God.”