

A Kingdom Of Priests and a Holy Nation: Ancient and Contemporary Challenges

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Text: Exodus 19: 1-6; I Peter 2: 9-10

Introduction: Trying to figure out who we are and what should characterize our church has been and always will be a challenge. Here at First Baptist Church of Boulder we find ourselves in a time of transition, a time between pastoral leadership and between our past and our future. We face both a *challenge* and an *opportunity* for not only **individuals** but also **congregations** to **step back**, take a look at where we have been historically and where we are headed in the years ahead.

A. We will be forced during these days to face certain realities - realities in terms of budget needs, realities in terms of the character of this congregation, realities in terms of what we are and what we want to be, realities in terms of our foundations and the need to be relevant in a changing world.

B. We also look ahead, to dream dreams, to have visions of what we would like to be and what we can be. Today, I would like for us to consider what the challenges and the options are for our congregation.

I would like to use as **a model the covenant between God and the Hebrew people** following the exile in Egypt, the escape under the leadership of Moses, and the covenant that God made with the former slaves as they anticipated returning to the land of Canaan. A few things to keep in mind: First, God initiates the covenant with the Hebrews and sets forth the terms of the covenant. God promises to be the God of the Hebrews. They in turn pledge to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These two challenges will often seem to be in contradiction to each other as the people try and figure out what they mean to their lives.

One of the interesting observations that I have discovered in my study and teaching of the OT is that **the concept of the covenant is vital to a proper understanding and interpretation of much of the OT literature.** E.g., the **40 years of wandering** in the wilderness following the exodus and the acceptance of the covenant is interpreted as a result of the **constant violation of the covenant - lack of faith** in the leadership of God and his representative Moses; **looking back** to Egypt for security and comfort; **worshipping false Gods; moral lapses; etc.**

OT books which Christians call "history" are called the Former Prophets by the Hebrews: Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings - why are they called prophetic books? Because they tell the story of how the Hebrews conquered Canaan, how they settled there, and how they lost the land eventually to foreign nations.

The underlying interpretation was that when they were obedient to the covenant they were successful. e.g., the story of the capture of **Jericho** where the walls came tumbling down is because the people trusted God and followed his instructions. Yet, immediately after this, they were driven back in embarrassment by the men of the small village of **Ai**. Why? Not because they had a poor battle plan - but because they had violated the covenant. **Achan** had stolen from the captured treasure that was to be dedicated to God. Only when this issue was resolved did they soldiers return and capture Ai - because they were obedient once again, not to mention that they had developed an new battle plan the resulted in the army of the city of Ai being trapped between two groups of Hebrew soldiers. Time and again obedience or lack of obedience to the covenant is the interpretation of success or failure in the efforts to take Canaan.

During the monarchy each king is judged upon whether or not he was faithful in leading the people to keep the covenant. A king was a good king if he did. David was the superb model, even when his flaws and shortcomings were openly admitted. Solomon was not as good, primarily because he allowed the worship of the false Gods of his many brides (which were the result of political treaties and negotiations with other kings.

As things got worse each king was judged more harshly. Especially in the Northern Kingdom, Israel, the phrase that a king did wrong in the eyes of the Lord and was worse than all who came before him seemed to be the standard for inept rulers.

Often the prophets would condemn both the political and religious leaders for failure to lead the people in keeping the covenant. They were immoral, unjust, corrupt, greedy, selfish, deceivers, and often while professing to be obedient to God.

The resulting consequence for failure to keep the covenant was the final loss of the nation and its land to foreign powers, nations who in many ways were even more evil and corrupt than the Hebrews. **So the prophetic condemnation in both the Former prophets and the latter prophets was the interpretation as to why the land that God had given to his people had been lost to other nations, such as Assyria, Egypt, and Babylonia. Later, the influence of the Persians and Greeks would also be a factor in the self-understanding of the Hebrews.**

Another aspect often lost in the stories was the call to be a kingdom of priests. The Hebrews became more and more exclusivist. Before the loss of the land, they often saw others as evil and wicked nations and peoples, and themselves as God's special people. Their biggest challenge was to keep the moral requirements of the covenant, to at least in terms of the ideal, to be a holy nation. Emphasis upon the priesthood and the temple expressed this desire and any contact, compromise, or collaboration with outsiders resulted in defilement.

After the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem brought an end to the Southern Kingdom, Judah, and after the Babylonian Captivity, and after the return of many to Judea, the approach of the religious and political leaders was avoidance of any contact with outsiders when at all possible. Neh. 13:1-3 tells about the discovery of a temple scroll that says that "no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of Israel. Ezra and Nehemiah ordered that the Hebrew men should not take foreign wives and that those that had foreign wives should set them aside. Why? The foreigners had corrupted the people and that had resulted in the violation of the covenant.

But there were voices reminding the people of the mission and ministry of the people, the responsibility to be a kingdom of priests. None is more forceful than that of the prophet whose message is found beginning in Chapter 40 of Isaiah. He is sometimes called Second Isaiah. He presented four beautiful songs about the suffering servant. The servant was a representative of Israel. The servant suffered, often not understanding why. He was a reed that was beaten by the wind and the rain, but not broken. He was a flickering flame of a candle that would not be extinguished. He was to be a light to the nations. He was a root out of dry ground, despised and rejected by men. Yet he was the instrument of God's purpose, of His redemption for all of mankind. The servant paid the price of forgiveness and salvation through his suffering, and therefore fulfilled the purpose that God had for the people of Israel as a kingdom of priests.

And, I think most of us here today think of Jesus when we read the songs of the suffering servant.

III. The Model of Jesus: In the World But Not of the World - When we examine our relationship to God through faith in Jesus Christ, the concept of the covenant is a good reminder of what we should be. In fact the covenant is an agreement, and the story of Jesus and what this means is found in the writings that we call the New Testament, or the New Covenant.

A. Through faith in Jesus Christ, God invites us into His family, His people, His church. We are not forced to have faith, or to be obedient. But when we do express faith in Jesus, it brings responsibility. We are now the ones who have been charged with both being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

A. **I Peter 2: 9-10** - This passage applies the language of the covenant to the church - He says to his readers that "you are a *chosen race*, a royal *priesthood*, a *holy nation*, a people for *God's own possession*, that you may *proclaim the excellence of Him* who has brought you *out of darkness*." We have received mercy, and that brings a covenant responsibility. Note that the initiative of God again is seen in the idea of a chosen race, that the concept of priesthood is evident for the Christians, that the idea of a holy nation is most evident for the church, and that God has made a claim on his people - we belong to

Him through faith in Jesus. Because of all of these pronouncements, we proclaim God's excellence for He has brought us out of darkness and into light. We are the "light of the world!"

B. The challenge that we face is very difficult. On the one hand we have ethical and moral responsibilities? Many churches in an attempt to be a holy people separate themselves from the world. They become a community within their community, and seek a sheltered life from the temptations and trials around them.

Those that emphasize the mission responsibility have to go into the world. The danger for them is too often in becoming corrupted or defiled by the world. Trying to fulfill both responsibilities of covenant is not easy. We need to strive toward being a moral and ethical people on the one hand, and a mission and ministering people on the other.

Conclusions: Jesus perhaps put this challenge best. He said that his followers were to be in the world, but not of the world.

So, what is FBC/Boulder to be now and in the days ahead - a people that challenges ourselves and others to ethical living rooted in the Lordship of Christ - individuals whose word is good, whose actions are moral, and whose ethics make our community and world a much better place?

FBC is also a people with a mission and a ministry - touching the lives of those that we encounter with good news, with love, with compassion, with mercy, and with justice.

We are indeed a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, and we are called upon to live out these challenges and opportunities that lie before us.