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Series 2. Understanding The Church

Episode 4. Beware of the Leaven: The Priesthood

Jesus Christ most often spoke of spiritual things in likeness to the natural so His disciples often misunderstood Him. When He cautioned them to, “*Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees,*” at the mention of the word *leaven* their minds immediately thought of bread, which they did not bring with them. Jesus however, was speaking of something much more sinister; something very deceptive that could creep into their lives and that of the Church He was to build.

At the time of the apostle Paul’s ministry, this *leaven of the Pharisees* had infiltrated the Galatian Church, as they started to embrace the beliefs and practices of the Old Testament Law. It seems that there is a tendency in man to drift from the spiritual into the natural, from the pursuit of life in Christ Jesus to the pursuit of obedience to commandment and rituals; from the freedom of the Spirit to the bondage of religion. You see, religion is a “no brainer” so

to speak, something that requires or involves little mental effort, or most importantly, the “work of faith” to believe in and pursue the spiritual, the invisible and intangible realities of God.

We believers must keep this in mind that Christ teaches from Divine wisdom, opening our understanding to the Spirit of revelation in His words. Of this Jesus said, Jn. 6.63- *“63It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.”*

Mt. 16.6 *“Then Jesus said to them, “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”*

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Jesus plainly highlighted this fact when speaking to the Samaritan woman He met drawing water at Jacob’s well. Perceiving Him to be a prophet she asked Him where was the best place to worship God, locally at Mt. Gerizim where her fathers worshipped or at Jerusalem. These both were places of “religious worship,” meaning the worshippers simply obediently followed a system of commandments, rituals, holydays, and sacrifices. To this Jesus plainly said, Jn. 4.21-24,

““Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. 22You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. 23But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. 24God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

These were most powerful and enlightening words Jesus spoke to this simple Samaritan woman. I am quite sure she could not understand their true significance, but they were said and well documented for our understanding today. As it is written, Lk. 24.45 *“He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures;”* so now we humbly pray the Spirit of Christ to continue His work in us and open our understanding to the spiritual reality of the word of God. O’ that we might become discerning believers, not as little children who could only feed on the milk of the word, but as mature adults feeding on the meat of the word that comes by revelation and understanding.

As for example, in Rev. 21.2 John writes of seeing the “New Jerusalem” coming down out of heaven. Like the disciples of Christ when hearing the word *leaven* and their minds immediately thought of bread, many today when they hear the word *Jerusalem* immediately think of a city, with buildings, streets of gold, and a magnificent temple; and in doing so, they are merely feeding on the milk of the word, perceiving a natural glorious city. Whereas, in all spiritual reality, the city is but a “type” of something more spiritual, like the time when Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven was like a treasure hidden in the field, or as a pearl of great price; the treasure and pearl were but a type, and or example of an invisible Kingdom. In Revelation 21 John is really speaking of the Church, who has now become the Bride of Christ, and he is saying that just as the city was linked to God by a holy bond, the Bride is now linked with an eternal holy bond to Christ, and is now being adorned for her Husband. This is made clear in Rev. 21. 9-10, where the angel said to John,

“9Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” 10And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God.

So too now, when Jesus said to “*take heed, be watchful of the leaven,*” His words must be taken most soberly, for they imply a spiritual caution, even a danger if it goes unheeded. *Leaven* is a yeast that when mixed in with bread dough secretly and silently infiltrates the whole mass of bread dough. It inflates the dough, adding only a measure of flavor and air bubbles. So, this warning was concerning the doctrines of the Pharisees instilled subtly, pervading the mind like leaven, and we might become “religious” like them, bound to commandments of God and of men, to rituals, sacrifices and the rest of the Law.

To let this command go unheeded is to invite corruption into the souls of men and ultimately into His Church. In opposition, Jesus said. Jn. 10.10 “*I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.*” And so our clear direction is to pursue *life* in Christ rather than an outward religious practice.

The doctrines the Pharisees taught were justification by the works of the Law, the tradition of the elders, free will of man, and commandments of men added to the Law. The doctrines of the Sadducees were that there was no resurrection of the dead, no angels, and no spirits. Jesus Christ brought an altogether different Gospel of spiritual “life” and thus cautioned His disciples to watch out, be on guard, lest they be infected by these religiously false teachings that have no part in the Kingdom of God.

The doctrine of life in Christ Jesus is at odds with all the doctrines of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The first is spiritual, the latter is carnal or fleshly; the first emphasizes regeneration into a new life, the latter emphasizes good works and obedience to commandments; the first promises the resurrection, the latter makes no such guarantees. The following Bible passages make these assumptions of “life in Christ” verses “works of the Law” very evident:

Gal. 2.16 “¹⁶knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.”

Gal. 2.19-21 “¹⁹For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. ²⁰I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. ²¹I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.”

Paul spent about two years in Galatia teaching them this vital truth, which is the fabric of the very foundational doctrine for the New Testament Church. But then, perhaps only a year or two later, he felt it necessary to write to them again the following:

Gal. 3.1-4 “¹O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? ²This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? ³Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? ⁴Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?

The *leaven* of the Pharisees had infiltrated the Galatian Church as they started to embrace the beliefs and practices of the Old Testament Law. It seems that there is a tendency in man to drift from the spiritual into the natural, from the pursuit of life in Christ Jesus to the pursuit of obedience to commandments and rituals, from the freedom of the Spirit to the bondage of religion. You see, religion is a “no brainer” so to speak, it is something that involves little mental effort, or most importantly, it does not require the “work of faith”; true faith requires effort to believe and to pursue the spiritual (the invisible and intangible) realities of God. For example, one may religiously follow certain commandments or rituals, or by faith pursue the invisible reality, “*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.*” (Gal. 2.20)

In the practice of religion we become as chickens confined to a chicken coop, pecking about on the ground for some nourishment with little effort, whereas the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus frees us as eagles allowing us to spread our wings and soar upward with an inward strength to the call of God. There is an enormous and significant distinction between the two.

And now, for the big question, has the *leaven* of the Pharisees infiltrated today’s Church, and if so, in what ways and what are its effects? The answer is yes, infectiously, profoundly, and overwhelmingly. Following, I wish to parcel out a few major examples and encouragements for rectification, beginning with the most blatant and damaging to the Church: the Old Testament priesthood.

The Church and the Priesthood

According to rabbinic sources (not Biblical), prior to Aaron and His sons, the priestly role was filled by the firstborn of each household. Abraham was said to pass the right of priesthood to

his son Isaac, who in turn passed it on to his son Jacob. These offered sacrifices on behalf of the household. This was extended and perhaps even expanded when God, in coming into a covenant with the people of Israel, promised, Ex. 19.6,

*“And you shall be to Me a **kingdom of priests** a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the children of Israel.”*

In this Covenant the people of Israel were promised to be a kingdom of priests to God—if, and only if, Ex. 19.5-6, *“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.”* However, the subsequent actions of these people put this Covenant in question. For examples, when the people saw God’s appearance on the mountain, accompanied by thunder, lightning, and smoke, with the sounding of the ram’s horn, they trembled and stood at a distance and said to Moses, Ex.20.19 . **¶***“Speak to us yourself and we will listen,” they said to Moses. “But do not let God speak to us, or we will die.”* They were putting into place a man as mediator between them and God. Sound familiar?

And then again when Moses was on the Mount receiving the Ten Commandments from God, that the LORD said to Moses, Ex. 32.7-9,

*z“Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. **g**They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!’ ” **¶**And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people!*

And so, instead of Israel being “to God a kingdom of priests, a holy nation,” God said to Moses, Ex.28.1 **¶***“Now take Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister to Me as priest, Aaron and Aaron’s sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar.”* Thus Aaron, his sons, and the entire tribe of the Levites were set apart for service to God on behalf of the people. The Levites had no inheritance in the Promised Land because God was to be their inheritance. As such, they did not go to war, and they were supported by the people. This appointment came out of God’s “permissive will” for Israel due to the disobedient and a *stiff-necked people*; but His more “perfect will” was for Israel *to be a Kingdom of priests*, each having a personal relationship with God.

The appointment of a *kingdom of priests* was subsequently fulfilled under the New Covenant in Christ. When John the Baptist, a Levite, baptized Jesus, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Holy Spirit fell upon Jesus whereby God anointed Him for His Messianic (Christ) ministry. Part of that ministry was the priesthood; as it is written, Heb.5.10 *“called by God as High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek.”* Melchizedek was the first person to be given the title “priest” in the Bible. His priesthood is considered to have existed before the Levitical priesthood and therefore to have been superior to it.

It is most important to read now Heb. 7.11-17 for it helps to lay the basis for the termination of the Old Covenant Law and its priesthood and the new spiritual priesthood with Christ as its high priest.

11Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? 12For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. 13For He of whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no man has officiated at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood. And it is yet far more evident if, in the likeness of Melchizedek, there arises another priest who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life. 17For He testifies: "You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek."

It is further important to note that this new priesthood in Christ is spiritual and not a physical priesthood like the Levites, who were selected to act as a mediator of the people: interceding for the people, offering sacrifices, instructing about the Law, and standing guard in God's house. **Therefore, in the religious nature of the Old Covenant, Israel was divided into two classes of people, the priests and the congregation.** This two-class system never existed before. Therefore, under the Old Covenant there was the holy priesthood of the Levites on the one side and the congregation or lay people on the other side. Do you see how this is replicated in today's Church with the clergy (priests, reverends, ministers, etc.) on the one side and the lay people, the congregants, on the other side. Once again, this was not the original will of God and is not only unnecessary in the Church; it is contrary to the will of God for its life and function. It is man who is insisting upon it; our Lord is resisting it.

Priesthood is explained in the New Covenant by Peter, 1 Pet. 2.9 *"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;"* And again in Rev. 1:6, 5:10, 20:6, where it is written, *"and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father."*

There is no ambiguity here, no separate classes of people in the Church, no clergy/congregation, but a body of priests to our God. The scriptures clearly use the plural pronouns: *you* and *us*. We must begin to see this fact clearly, knowing it will cut across the grain of most established churches in the world today. Churches today have "dug their heel in" resisting any kind of change, especially when it means that those who are presently in power and authority will be affected the most. This is a most difficult and delicate situation.

How can a church function without the mediating clergy to lead, nourish and guide the people? To answer this, we have to look through a different window, not a natural window where we see the physical church building, its governmental organization, its leadership offices (the Clergy), and its rituals, and congregations and so on. Rather, we look through a spiritual window where the mental picture of a Christian "organization" and structure is de-emphasized and that of a living "organism" becomes the sole focus.

I once saw a very large field of sunflowers. It was amazing to see it. Once the seed was planted and moisture and warmth enter into each individual seed, they became living, growing, maturing, and each bearing the fruit of 1000 to 2000 seeds in its flower because they were alive. And all flowers, hundreds of thousands of them, faced in the exact same direction, towards the sun, as if focused only on the sole source of sustaining life.

There is one Head and that is Jesus Christ, one source of sustaining life, One who is not separate from the Church but is the sole Head, sharing into each member His own life and work, as it is written in Eph. 1.22-23,

22And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, 23which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

The headship of the Church is singular, belonging to Christ alone, not a pope, prophet, bishop, pastor, reverend, or minister. When it is written that the Church is *His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all*, the leading idea is firstly of the individuality of each member, and then secondarily, of their union together in one body, bound together by one source of life, and one head; 1Cor. 12:21, “the head and the foot,” just as much as “the eye and the hand,” are all simply looked upon as members of the same body; it is from the signal of the head, the brain, that the foot moves, the eye sees, the heart beats, the lungs breathe, and the hand grips. Independent members function together as a whole under one Head. Also the individual, it is also noted,

*1 Jn. 2.20-21 “20But **you** have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. 21I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth.*

1Jn. 2.26-27 “26These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you. 27But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.

Let us pause for a moment and allow the Spirit to unlock these awesomely powerful passages of scripture. Being born again of the Spirit of Christ means that His influence is actually “in” your heart and life; this is because His Seed is in you and He permanently abides with you, and will be your guide through calm as well as rough waters, through simple understanding to the revealing the mysteries of God, and to the discernment of truth from dangerous error. John wrote this encouragement because he was convinced of the fact that these members of the Church have been anointed unto God as **Kings and priests**.

John wrote these things to teach the truth of God; therefore to say that, “*you do not need that anyone teach you,*” means that once having received these truths we are capable of navigating our own course in life having the fundamental source of light and life abiding in us. Our security, growth, and maturity must come out from our individual fellowship with Christ as well as from our fellowship with one another. It is as John introduced this letter in 1 Jn. 1.3 “*3that which we*

have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

So, do you see, the overwhelming reality, that each and every believer is independently anointed with the Spirit of Christ and is grafted into Christ for the sustaining of His life by our fellowship with Him; we are also bonded together with one another as members of the Body of Christ, reliant upon one another by our fellowship with one another.

How then must the Church function?

So, then the question might now be asked, “How then must the Church function if not by mediators and principle figures like popes, bishops, pastors, etc., but by individual members each looking independently unto Christ who is our bond to one another? I will address this more fully next time.

S2.E4. Questions for Discussion

1. In your own words, explain the difference between religion under the Old Covenant of Moses and spirit and life under the New Covenant of Christ.
2. Explain “types” as used in the Bible, using a natural object to represent a spiritual idea. Cite some examples.
3. Why did the apostle Paul call the Church of Galatia “*foolish*” and *bewitched*?
4. Explain the priesthood under the Old Covenant, how it began, who composed it, and their function.
5. Who is the High Priest under the New Covenant, and who are its priest?