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Reviving God's Covenant with Levi: Reflections on Malachi 2:1-9¹

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Last fall I worked my way through the Old Testament prophets. As I have been studying this fascinating material I have kept asking myself: If any of these prophets were to reappear and begin preaching to the Christians of America, whose message would be the most fitting for us? I am sure we would be inspired by the lofty theology of Isaiah, and sympathize with the weeping prophet Jeremiah. We would probably be turned off by the strange antics of Ezekiel, and throw Amos out for touching too many nerves, especially of the middle and upper class. We would send Jonah back to Joppa because his message is too judgmental. Hosea's preaching has lost its edge because his marriage to a prostitute is now viewed as an alternative family life style. As I have been reading I have become increasingly convinced that the Israelite preacher evangelical Christians of this country most need to hear is Malachi. Not that we would accept his message. It is hard-hitting and sharp. There is no pulling the punches here, no tickling ears, no catering to people whose primary reason for coming to church is to be stroked, who want to feel good about themselves as they leave the service.

Malachi appears on the scene when people were more orthodox in their creeds than in their living; when the flame of spiritual vitality was flickering, in grave danger of going out. He preaches to the community of returned exiles, one hundred years after Cyrus had issued the decree permitting the Jews to return to Jerusalem from Babylon. But this time the enthusiasm in worship and faith in God that had accompanied the rededication of the new temple had given way to despondency, religious cynicism, and even contempt for the Lord. Exactly why this happened we may only speculate. Perhaps the people had become bitter because the Lord was not breaking into their historical situation to bring deliverance from Persian rule, which had become increasingly oppressive

under Darius. Perhaps it was just a natural development. These were third generation believers who could parrot their theological creeds, but whose love for the Lord had been replaced by coldness, indifference and perhaps even bitterness.

Whatever the cause of the malaise, Malachi's aim was two-fold. First, he attempted to expose the symptoms of spiritual indifference: irreverence in worship (1:6-14), lack of concern for God's Word (2:1-9), unfaithfulness in marriage relationships (2:10-16), disregard, exploitation, and oppression of the poor (3:5), and stinginess in one's devotion to God (3:7-15). So the prophet appeals passionately for moral and spiritual reform. He deplores their conduct, not because good deeds in themselves determine right standing before God, but on the grounds that they are symptomatic of something much more fundamental. They betray the state of one's heart, one's attitudes, in this case a basic lack of reverence for God.

Second, he attempted to rekindle in the people a proper respect for the Lord. The importance of this motif is obvious. Malachi 1:6 functions as one of the key thematic statements in this book: "Where is My honor?" The agenda is reflected also in the references to "making My name Great" (1:11), "fearing My name" (1:14), "fearing Me" (2:5a; 3:5), "standing in awe of My name" (2:5b), "fearing the Lord and esteeming His name" (3:16). Malachi attempts to inspire new respect for the Lord, not with an awe-inspiring lecture on the attributes of God, but:

- (1) By analogy. If we show respect toward our fathers and masters (1:6), or the governor (1:9), how much more should we stand in awe/fear of Yahweh, the "great King" (1:14)?
- (2) By references to God's activity. God is the sovereign Elector (1:2-3); the Creator (2:10); the Judge (3:1-3, 5a).
- (3) By his titles for God. In 1:14 the Lord is identified as Adonay, "Master." More common, however, is his use of the title "the Lord of Hosts," which appears twenty-four times in this short book. How successful Malachi was in his campaign for greater reverence

for God is difficult to tell.

Above all else, the prophecy of Malachi should be seen as a call to take God seriously. The Lord is to be recognized as He defines Himself. His people must stop treating Him so lightly, an attitude which is often a consequence of having defined Him on our own terms. Like the people of His day, we too need to let God be God as He sees Himself, to commit ourselves to Him in whole-hearted covenant commitment, and to express this devotion in our worship and our daily lives.

In the first chapter of the book of Malachi the prophet's primary concern is that his people might regain a proper reverence for God, a reverence commensurate with his status as the great divine King. Their irreverence had been reflected especially in their worship. Although the whole community was indicted for sacrilege in their ways of offering their sacrifices, according to 1:6 the priests bore particular responsibility for the current evil. These professional "fearers of the Lord" were despising His name by treating His altar with contempt.

In 2:1-9 the prophet focuses exclusively on the priests. He demonstrates their fundamental defect to be their attitude toward God and to their office. In attempting to set them straight, especially on the latter, Malachi provides us with the most systematic and complete statement of the teaching ministry of the priesthood in the Old Testament. This admittedly raises the problem of applying texts like these to ourselves in the twentieth century. We no longer have this type of professional priesthood in the Protestant churches. We believe in the priesthood of all believers. According to Hebrews, Jesus Christ is the only priest, and we all have direct access to Him. However, we still recognize that some members of the body are called to special spiritual leadership. Therefore, what we have to say on this text has direct relevance for pastors, elders, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, women who have charge of special ministries in the church.

The Privilege of the Priesthood

The minister as heir to the Lord's covenant with Levi. In 2:1-9, Malachi highlights the privilege of priestly ministry by three expressions: the first in verses 4-5, the second and third in verse 7. First, according to verses 4-5, God has made a covenant with Levi. The choice of the term "covenant" is highly significant. In common usage the word applied to contracts or treaties between individuals or nations (Gen. 31:44; 1 Kings 5:26, etc.). Covenants were of two types: parity treaties between two equals, like the marriage bond Malachi will refer to later in 2:12, and suzerainty treaties initiated by a superior and offered or imposed on a subject. In biblical usage the latter is more common, as in God's covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:9-17), Abraham (Gen. 15:18; 17:2-21), Israel at Sinai (Exod. 19:5), David (Ps. 89:4, 29, 34, 39), and the new covenant anticipated by Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31ff.). But nowhere else is it used of God's appointment of the Levites to priestly duty in Israel. Numbers 25:12, where the Lord makes a covenant with Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, offers the closest parallel. For taking his stand against the immorality in Israel and turning away the wrath of God, Phinehas is rewarded with "My peace covenant." The entire text reads as follows: "Behold, I give him (Phinehas) My covenant of peace; and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God, and made atonement for the sons of Israel" (Num. 25:13).

Malachi 2:5-7 appears to conflate the Levitical and priestly covenants. By making His covenant with the Levites, God had placed them in a special relationship to Himself. He chose them for His service of the sanctuary, a position that brought with it both privileges and responsibilities.

Malachi identifies three *objectives* which the covenant with Levi was intended to achieve: life, peace and reverence. Through the ministry of the priests the grace of God was to be mediated. Life speaks of the salvation the covenant with the

Levites brought Israel. Apart from this grace there is death; people are lost! *Shalom* speaks of the confident, friendly relationship God desired with His people. This is more than the absence of hostility. It is a positive term descriptive of total health and well-being, the answer for alienation. The final term, *reverence*, describes a benefit that was to accrue to God. It is this aspect that is uppermost in the present context. The function of the priests was to promote reverence for God. Traditionally this had been their role. In their ministry and their conduct they had modeled this respect and fear for God.

This remains the charge and the privilege of all who are called to priestly ministry. God counts on us to be agents of life and peace, and to inspire others to display reverence and awe toward God. The primary role of a leader is not simply to organize, to administer church affairs, to run the program, to come up with creative ideas, to entertain (cf. Ezek. 33:30-33). We often evaluate them on the basis of all wrong carnal criteria.

The minister as guardian of the truth. In the syntax of verse 7 we discover the second dimension to priestly privilege: The priests functioned as the guardians of truth. They were not perceived primarily as "searchers for the truth." They had it in their possession, in the revealed and written Torah. The expression "to preserve" truth is a military term, used normally of guarding a city against foreign attack, or of those hired to protect a king or other important official from those who would harm him. Paul picks up the imagery of "guarding the treasure" which has been entrusted to him. Divine revelation is treated as a special treasure placed into the care and safekeeping of the priests. It is to these men that people should be able to come in their search for the *Torah*, the instruction of God.

This is a word of truth, not human speculation or human opinion, not primarily the results of experience or even scientific observation, but the revealed Word of God. This is

what the instruction of the church used to consist of. In the vision of the founders of most of our seminaries this was to be the core of the curriculum. In our statements of faith we still affirm "that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct."

But in preaching in our churches, the ethical standards of our people, we are dancing to the drumbeat of the world. According to numerous recent polls, more people than ever before claim to be born again, but fewer and fewer know the biblical language of Salvation; for fewer and fewer does faith make any difference in their lives.

How often have we evangelical priests betrayed our confession and our calling. Hungry people come to us ministers and college and seminary teachers for bread, but we give them stones. Our children come to their Sunday school teachers for a word from God, but they concentrate on entertaining them, thinking they have done well to get through another forty-minute session without a major disturbance. Every week we gather as the Lord's people, but we fill the Sunday morning service with all kinds of activity, so we don't have time for a word from God. And when genuinely hungry people come to receive a fresh revelation from God through the words of the preacher, we fill their plates with the husks, the chaff, and the peelings of human wisdom. Too often we are more concerned to impress our hearers with our breadth of knowledge in the fields of psychology, philosophy, science, and literature, than in communicating a passionate word from God. It is no wonder that we suffer from such an epidemic of spiritual anemia and rickets of the heart. There is a famine in America: a famine far more disastrous than our inability to buy food because inflation keeps eating up our dollars, or unemployment puts us on the bread line, or the crops fail. Amos talks about such famine in 8:11-13.

Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord God, "when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord. And people will stagger from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east; they will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they will not find it. In that day the beautiful virgins and the young men will faint from thirst.

As in the days of Malachi, so today, those charged with guarding the truth of God and proclaiming it have betrayed their hearers. Which leads me to the third dimension of priestly privilege:

The priest functions as messenger of the Lord of hosts. The term messenger is incorporated in the prophet Malachi's name. In Greek it is rendered from the word in which we get our English word *angel*. An angel is not some rosy-cheeked, winged creature, as we often imagine, but a person specially commissioned and authorized to speak for God, the divine King. Malachi may here be intentionally punning on his own name. If so, it is possible that he himself was a priest, and that the name Malachi is a pseudonym, indicative of his own response to the covenant with Levi, in contrast to the superficial devotion of his fellow priests. This would certainly explain his cultic interests. Perhaps he was one member of the order who was especially concerned to reform it from within.

Such is the privilege of the priesthood: Heir of the covenant of life, peace, and reverence; guardian of the truth; official spokesman for God. These observations are important for all of us who are viewed as ministers. It is not our education, our intelligence, our wit, our experience, or even our gifts that qualify us to stand before God's people. These may qualify us to stand behind a political or academic podium, or to teach at a university, but they have no bearing at all on our authority to stand behind a pulpit or in front of a Sunday school class. We have that right only by virtue of the calling of God.

The Responsibilities of the Priesthood

But with every privilege comes responsibility. How are priests to fulfill their calling? In verse 6 Malachi offers us extremely practical advice on how the privilege of the priestly covenant is to be answered by specific responsible behavior. The prophet looks back, almost with nostalgia, on how the priests used to operate. How had they mediated life, peace, and reverence to the people? Remarkably, Malachi makes no reference to sacrifices, or festivals, or pilgrimages, with which priestly leadership is commonly associated.

First, the priests had provided true instruction with integrity. Positively expressed, "instruction of truth" was in their mouths; expressed negatively, no unrighteousness or twistedness was found on their lips. In other words, the priests brought the people life, peace, and reverence toward God by straight talk, true speech and correct instruction, undoubtedly based upon the Torah which they had received from Moses. Their first task was teaching, indoctrinating God's people with His truth.

Second, their relationship with the Lord was right. They walked with Him in peace and uprightness. The expression "to walk with God" is remarkably rare in the Scripture. The best known example of this kind of piety is Enoch, who "walked with God three hundred years after he became the father of Methuselah.... Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Gen. 5:22, 24). In fact, Enoch's conduct was so virtuous that he was more at home in the personal presence of God than among mortals on earth. A similar comment is made about Noah in Genesis 6:9, "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God." In the present context the expression speaks of professional as well as personal conduct. The quality of the former priests' behavior is expressed with two words, "in peace" and "in uprightness." They modeled in their lives what they taught with their lips. This is incarnational leadership, like that of Ezra, who set his

heart "to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). Malachi may even be thinking of Ezra as the model of how the priesthood should operate.

Third, they were instrumental in transforming many lives. They called people to repentance, to turn away from their sin, and to redirect their allegiance in the direction of God. Far from viewing their task as stroking people, affirming them, making them believe they are all right, they interrupted the people's circular thinking, exposed their sin, and appealed to them to repent and change.

As we look back over the history of the English-speaking world, we can recognize the influence of godly men like those of whom Malachi speaks. Who can measure the impact of Jonathan Edwards or D.L. Moody on this continent, or Charles Spurgeon and the Wesley brothers in Britain? Their impact did not derive from their specialization in one aspect of their work, because they were effective administrators, expert counselors, creative leaders. They embodied these three qualities: They provided solid biblical instruction; in their personal lives they walked blamelessly with God; they called men and women from sin. At one time Israel had this kind of priests too. And so did we.

The Problems of Priesthood

So much for theory. But what was the reality precipitating this passionate prophetic utterance? In verses 8-9 Malachi describes the sorry state of the ministry in his time. As he sees it, his contemporaries have fallen short of their high calling in three areas. Personally, instead of ministering as the Lord had ordained, they had themselves apostatized from the way. They had turned aside from the course of truth. Publicly, in their perversion they had also dragged others down. The very people to whom they were to have brought life and peace and salvation, they had caused to stumble *with their instruction*.

Professionally, they had betrayed their calling and their special privilege. They had violated the covenant of the Levites.

It all sounds so modern, so American, so evangelical. Isn't this precisely what has happened to the ministry in this country? I am not speaking only of the mainline churches, who abandoned their commitment to the Scriptures long ago, and these days are leading the way in defending all kinds of immoral and deviant behavior. I am talking about evangelical ministers. Just last week I heard about a seminary classmate of mine, one of the brightest men on campus, who after graduation went on to doctoral studies in Old Testament at one of our nationally recognized Jewish schools. While a doctoral student he founded a church, whose attendance now, twenty years later, exceeds fifteen hundred each Sunday. We stand back and observe, amazed at his effectiveness. What a messenger of God! What an agent of life and peace! But, as in so many instances recently, this brilliant man with a Ph.D. in Old Testament ceased being a guardian of the truth; not only had he stopped calling men and women from sin; he himself abandoned the way of God and betrayed his calling with his own moral failure. This problem has reached epidemic proportions. It has not hit only the Jim Bakkers or the Jimmy Swaggerts; it has infected the ministry of small country churches and large city congregations, as more and more messengers of God fall into sin, and then find clever ways of rationalizing it.

Which leads me to my final point—how does God respond to the betrayal of the calling to the priestly ministry?

The Warning for the Priesthood

Malachi gives a summary warning in verse 9. Because the priests of Malachi's day had failed to live up to their obligations, God Himself had caused them to be disgraced before all people. This verse may be considered an interpretive comment on verses 1-4, with which this text had opened. Malachi

had begun this second address abruptly: "I have sent this commandment to you" (2:4), followed by a warning that the future of the priests depends upon their treatment of the name of the Lord. By calling for honor for the name of the Lord, Malachi is not talking simply of capitalizing Lord every time he writes it, nor using Thee and Thou when we speak to God, or even substituting the tetragrammaton with a less sacred name, a practice common in orthodox Jewish circles to this day. To the prophet the name of God is not honored or dishonored by our pronunciation, but by our response to His person. By failing to take temple worship seriously, and in failing to fulfill their official duties, the priests had treated His name with contempt.

The consequences of betraying the covenant of ministry are shocking. In the first place, the Lord declares that he will inflict the priests with His curse; He will curse their blessings. Indeed he has already begun to do so. What is meant by cursing the priest's blessing is not clear. Years ago Keil saw in the expression a reversal of the blessings they pronounce. That is, God will turn them into curses. Reversing the pattern in the proclamation of Balaam (Num. 22-24), whenever the priests opened their mouths to pronounce the Aaronic blessing (Num. 6:24-26), curses would issue forth. The Catholic *Jerusalem Bible* identifies the blessings with the revenues of the priests, their tithes, atonement money, and portions of the sacrifices. In other words, they will lose their economic security. A third possibility is that God will remove from this hereditary class of ministers their special status in the community. According to Exodus 32:29, in response to their loyalty to the Lord, when the rest of the Israelites were worshipping the golden calf, a special blessing had been pronounced on the Levites. The full implications of this are spelled out in Numbers 3:5ff., according to which this tribe was especially set apart by God as the first-born belonging to Him. It is difficult to tell which interpretation Malachi had in

mind. He may have been intentionally ambiguous, inviting his hearers to consider each possibility.

Second, God would publicly shame His ministers. Not only would He rebuke their descendants and successors. He would spread their faces with refuse the way bread is spread with peanut butter. The expression is shocking. The term for refuse refers to offal, the viscera, the guts, which are removed from an animal that is butchered or prepared for the priests. This is what God thinks of our feasts! The result of all this will be total disgrace and rejection. Like the waste materials from a meat packing plant, so the priests will be hauled off to the garbage dump. According to verse 4, God's purpose in sending this warning is obviously redemptive. He does not want to cast His servants aside. He would like His covenant with Levi to continue. After all, it is His covenant.

The practical lessons to be drawn from this warning seem rather obvious. God will not tolerate parasites in His kingdom. To those to whom much has been given, much will be required. The privilege of representing the people before God, standing as the first-born of the nation, carries with it not only special status, but tremendous responsibilities. God will not allow the use of this high office merely as a means of making a living, a profession like any other. Those who pride themselves in their positions of influence in the church, and who use these positions for personal ambition God will reject. Their ministry is nothing but dung in His sight, refuse to be wiped in their faces. They are thereby identified with the offal itself, and qualify only for the rubbish heap. These are strong words for those who are looked to as spiritual leaders.

Conclusion

I sometimes wonder how God feels about the way we pursue our spiritual duties. Does He see in our service reverence for His name and respect for the special covenant He has made with us His messengers? Or is He appealing to us even

now to reexamine our commitment? Whatever our priestly role, whether as teachers, youth leaders, elders, or preachers, are we fulfilling our functions of bringing life and peace to men, and promoting reverence for God? Is our instruction that of His truth, or are we merely reflecting the teachings of our society? How about our walk with God? Are our conduct and our speech of irreproachable integrity? Are we actually turning people away from their iniquity, or making them think they are all right in their sin? Unfortunately, ministers all too often offer people exactly what they want when they come for counseling. Instead of declaring to them the mind of the Lord they excuse the sin, encouraging poor victims to continue their searches for fulfillment. Which reminds me of the powerful poem of Elmer Suderman:

"They Smell of Perfumed Assemblies"²

Here they come,
my nonchalants,
my lazy daisies,
their dainty perfume
disturbing the room
the succulent smell
seductive as hell.

Here they are
my pampered flamboyants,
status spoiled, who bring
with exquisite zing
their souls spic and span
protected by Ban,
their hearts young and gay
decked in handsome cliché,
exchanging at my call
with no effort at all
worship for whispering

God for gossiping,
theology for television.

Baptized in the smell
of classic Chanel
I promote their nod
to a jaunty God
Who, they are sure,
is a sparkling gem
superbly right for them.

There they go
my in-crowd
my soft-skinned crowd,
my suntanned, so-so
elegant, swellegant,
natty, delectable,
suave, cool, adorable,
DAMNED!

When people come to us for advice and instruction do we take seriously our role as God's messengers? Do they? This is the only basis of authority that we have. Unless we are extremely conscientious in our own discovery of the Lord's will, and personally seek to find it in His Word, we have lost our only claim to hearing. People in a post-literate and post-Christian age will not discover the Lord's message on their own. God is counting on us.

Who among us does not recognize that the status of the ministry in our society has suffered greatly in recent years? If people require help, they turn first to the politician, or their medical doctor or their psychiatrist. They are looking for someone to lead them out of the wilderness which our present humanistic and mechanistic age has produced. But I am afraid we have brought this disrespect upon ourselves. For too long

we have been merely repeating the platitudes of society. We have stopped listening to the voice of God long ago, let alone walking with Him and teaching His message. Two decades ago the noted American psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, threw the ball back into the court. If society and the church are to gain an increased reverence for God and all that comes with it, it is up to us. We are the messengers of God.³

What Malachi says in this text finds a ringing echo in Paul's extremely practical advice to the aspiring young minister:

In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following. But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, disciple yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers. Prescribe and teach these things. Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress may be evident to all. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you (1 Tim. 4:6-16. Note especially vv. 11ff.).

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Endnotes

- 1 This is a revised version of a sermon presented at Elk Grove Baptist Church, Elk Grove Village, Illinois, January 22, 1995.
- 2 *Theology Today* 28 (1971), 50-51.
- 3 Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn, 1973), 198ff.