

# LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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## A PAGAN CULTURE AND A NEW PRIESTHOOD

In his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* The late Leslie Newbigin, an English Theologian, had a chapter entitled "The Myth of the Secular Society" in which he shows that modern Christianity has accepted the myth that modern society is on a steady and irreversible course toward increasing secularization. He argues that what we have is not a secular culture but a pagan one, a culture which does not disallow gods, and therefore is worshipping gods which are not God. The difference in a secular and a pagan culture is a secular culture is devoid of any recognition of God or gods, while a pagan culture worships gods of their own making. Webster defines secularism as "indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion." Secular humanism is defined as "a philosophy viewed as a non-theistic (no gods) religion antagonistic to traditional religion." Paganism is defined as a "polytheistic (many gods) belief that delights in sensual pleasure and material goods. America as a nation cannot yet be described as "a secular culture" that is, devoid of any recognition of God or gods, rather it is a "pagan culture" that worships gods of its own making. The Christian Right would argue that the goal of the state is to create a secular culture ruling out belief in any god, especially the God of the Bible. However, when the belief of God is disallowed the state itself becomes a god thus establishing a pagan culture not a secular culture. C.S. Lewis wrote in *God in the Dock*: "there is no point in telling state officials to mind their own business. Our whole lives are their business." Even the secular media mentions this. A columnist recently wrote in his newspaper column: "The state is a virtual object of worship. In the society in which we live, government is now, to many, not only next to God, government is God."

In the Old Testament (NASV) God referred to the nations in the land the Israelites were to settle as "Pagans" (Lev. 25:44). There is a strange prohibition in Exodus 23:19; 34:26 and Deuteronomy 14:2 that tell the Israelites "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk." According to the *New Bible Dictionary* this referred to a Pagan ritual, which the inspired writer called for the complete rejection of this local practice. It was an idolatrous, polytheist Canaanite fertility ritual, with strong elements of cult magic." This says that Israel was to avoid such practices because of the idolatry and magic associated with it. For example they could have easily incorporated this pagan practice in their ordinance of the feast of weeks. (Perhaps this would have enticed some of the pagans to join them and thus be converted to the true and living God). However abstaining from such practices, not assimilating them was what testified of the presence of the living God. It seems the modern church is guilty of "boiling a kid in its mother's milk" by our incorporating the paganism of the world into our efforts to reach them with the gospel. The message of the gospel is not designed to please the world nor appeal to the winning over paganism by any means. By "boiling a kid in its mother's milk" the church can get people in but are they bringing people to a true knowledge of Jesus Christ. How can we do that without preaching on sin and repentance? God's message never been popular with the pagan societies.

Perhaps the title of this article may call for an explanation as to why the priesthood has any connection with the pagan culture. When we understand the scriptural teaching on priesthood and the fact that Christ is pictured as "our great High priest" (Heb. 4:14; 10:21) and that his church is a "royal Priesthood" (I Pet. 2:9) we will see the responsibility of the priesthood in a pagan culture.

Christ as a priest is mentioned in only one book of the N.T., the book of Hebrews, where it is said 16 times that he is a priest. He is not just any priest. He was neither a Levite nor a descendant of Aaron. He was a priest after the order of Melchizedek, who is the first priest mentioned in Scripture (Gen 14:18). He is mentioned by name 8 times in Hebrews. The only other book that mentions him is Psalm 110:4. Little is preached today about priesthood, let alone about Melchizedek. Our major today is on the cross, a dead Christ to the neglect of the Priesthood, a living Christ. In Scripture there is more space given to Melchizedek than to baptism and more to the priesthood of Christ than to the Lord's Supper. There is no way the subject of the priesthood is more important than these, but it does show how greatly it has been neglected.

Christ having become a High Priest has established a new priesthood. In Exodus 19:5,6 we find that Israel was to be "a holy nation of priests." Israel never became a holy nation, much less a kingdom of priests. So God created a new nation of priests (Matt. 21:43; I Peter 2:5,9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). The church now serves as God's priesthood on earth. What does it mean for the church to be a nation of priests? The answer is found, as many answers are found, in the book of Genesis. In the beginning Adam was given two responsibilities: cultivate the garden (Hebrew word: *'abed*, to till, serve, tend). And to keep it (Hebrew word: *shamar*: to guard and protect). After the rebellion (3:23) Adam still had to work (*'abed*) but his status was altered; he is defrocked and removed from the office of Eden's guardian (3:24). Now in Numbers 18:5-7 the priest's work is described. The same two words that described the work of Adam are used to describe the work of priests. They were to attend to the duties of the temple (*'abed*) and guard (*shamar*) the sanctity of their charge from intruders. Out of all the nations of the world Israel was chosen as priests to cultivate (*'abed*) a relationship with God and provide protection (*shamar*) to the nations and give them a revelation of God.

In Matthew 21:43 we find that Israel was deposed from office, and the kingdom was taken from them and given to a nation (the church) bearing the fruit of the kingdom (I Peter 2:5,9). Task of cultivation (*'abed*) and protection (*shamar*) was given to the people of the new covenant. This means the church has a responsibility to the culture around it. Israel failed in its duty of being a priesthood to the pagan culture around it. The church, having a great high priest, has no excuse for not influencing the pagan culture. The church is called to be at peace with God and at war with the culture. Too often it is at war with God and at peace with the culture. Jesus said "the field is the world." The church is to cultivate it by making disciples then teaching them to grow in the grace and knowledge of God to become a holy

people. Also they are to guard the world against the forces of evil (Eph. 6:10,11). Thus fulfilling the work that Adam and Israel both failed to live up to, that of a holy priesthood to the world. Only the church is equipped with the armor under the spiritual power of our great high priest has the power to defeat the pagan powers of the world. If the church is not faithful in this, the pagan culture will be (and is being) taken over by evil powers. Sadly instead of fulfilling our duty as priests in a pagan society the church busies itself with building buildings, arguing over contemporary or traditional worship and imitating the world by trying to find schemes to impress our young people and accommodate a generation of baby boomers who have rejected the word of God and embraced theology of psychology and well-being. There are three reasons why the church has a failed priesthood. We have a weak doctrine of sin. When the pagan world handles sin carelessly, there is a need for a priesthood. There has been an over emphasis on the cross (the blood is shed, but we need to understand its application). And there is a failure to realize the significance of the resurrection and ascension of Christ. If his present rule as priest-king is denied these have little meaning. We need to restore the office of the priesthood in the church.

Author Regie McNeal in his book *The Present Future* states: "The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money runs out (80 percent of money given to congregations come from people ages fifty-five and older) or when the remaining three-fourths of a generation who are institutionalism loyalists die off or both." The world has long looked upon the church as being moss-backed and archaic and out of touch with the culture. Thus it has been spurned, neglected and ignored by a pagan culture, which feels it has no need of even recognizing the church as being a viable factor in everyday affairs of men. Part of the reason for the low estimation of the church by the pagan culture is due to the fact that the church has always been seen as something outside the accepted norms of culture. The pagan culture has therefore dismissed the church as being of no real importance. We hear a lot today about a post-modern world, meaning the world is rapidly changing. This is also true of the modern religious system. We hear talk of post-Christian or post-modern church. There is no doubt that the pagan culture is experiencing a drastic change in attitudes and actions. This is also true of the church. This does not mean that the church of Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture is irrelevant or that it is going to die. The church Jesus founded will continue until he returns. History records the birth, life and death of many cultures. Our own modern society is not exempt from dying and as it dies so dies the church culture the society has produced. The Scriptures would define the modern pagan culture in the terms of the "Great city, Babylon," described in Revelation 18 or in John's definition of the world in I John 2:16.

Christ inaugurated his ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth by quoting Isaiah 61:1: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18, 19). By these words he announced his confrontation with a pagan culture that was in conflict with God and had kept mankind enslaved since the

beginning. To understand how a pagan culture behaves we have only to read about how it began in Genesis and see how it operated throughout the history of God's people in the Old Testament. It is in the ministry of Jesus and in the life of the early church that we see how Jesus confronted the culture of the world and how the church dealt with it. The late Richard Neibuhr, president of Elmhurst College and later professor of Yale Divinity School, in *Christ and Culture* wrote: "Some have argued that Jesus ignored culture. Joseph Klausner writes: 'He did not come to enlarge his nation's knowledge, art, and culture, but to abolish even such culture as it possessed, bound up in religion.'" Jesus paid very little attention to politics. There were radical Jewish nationalist movements in his day but he refused to take part in them even when they tried to make him king (John 6:15). However he chose Simon the Zealot as one of his Apostles (Matt. 10:4). He advised the normal payment of taxes (Matt. 22:21; 17:24ff). He did not take a stand against the many political scandals in Judea and said nothing against Roman torture, or crucifixion or against extortion which was probably rampant of the era. He associated with publicans and sinners and prostitutes and people who were "unclean" in the Jewish mind.

Jesus confronted the culture of his day, not by attacking the systems of the world, but by destroying Satan's grip on culture. He did this not by a ministry of condemnation of a pagan Roman culture that held the people in political bondage, rather he directed his attention to the corrupt religious system that had long ago left the teachings and concepts of God's revealed law. Jesus knew if the world were to be changed it would be changed by the people of God, not by the people who were a part of the pagan system. Thus he taught that people of God are "the salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Matt. 5:13, 14), and he admonished them to "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). This is echoed to the early church in the words of the Apostle Paul: "prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life (Phil. 2:14-16). This is the spiritual task of God's "royal priesthood."

The pagan culture of the world has long lived by the philosophy that everyone is free to do their own thing and whatever they choose to do is right for them. The modern church has in its effort to be acceptable and non-offensive adopted this philosophy of the pagan culture around it, saying that if one is sincere and feels good about it then it doesn't matter what one believes. Believing whatever one wants to believe and doing whatever they want to do nullify the Biblical teaching on holiness and godly living, which is the foundation of the royal priesthood. The late Walt Kelley, creator and author of the comic strip "Pogo" had the little possum saying "We have met the enemy and he is us." Since Satan appears "as an angel of light" (II Cor. 11:14), it is hard sometimes to recognize the enemy, especially since the wall between the modern church and the pagan culture is slowly disappearing. After all Satan is the "prince of the powers of the air...the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2) and controls the culture of the world (I John 5:10), so the thrust of his activity is toward the church. What more effective way to do this than to infiltrate the church with the culture of the world and use it against itself thus making it its own worst enemy?

