

The Privilege of a Pilgrim Church

7 Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct. 8 Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday, today, and forever. 9 Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. For *it is* good that the heart be established by grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them. 10 We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. 11 For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. 12 Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. 13 Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. 14 For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.

15 Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *our* lips, giving thanks to His name. 16 But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. 17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (Heb. 13:7-17)

Years ago, I travelled to see some relatives in Western Australia. One of them, an outspoken atheist asked what vocation I was pursuing and I told him it was ministry and Christian radio. His response was to say, “That’s like being a horseshoe manufacturer outside a car factory”. In his mind, I was a fool, someone who didn’t understand the way the world works, the way economics works, the way money is made. I didn’t understand the mainstream of life, he thought.

On the other hand, I meet Christians who are alarmed because they think the church is not doing a good enough job in becoming more popular, more mainstream. They complain that Christianity is “irrelevant” to mainstream society, and they think it is because the church preaches the wrong message, or uses the wrong music, or doesn’t have the right programs, or fails to use the right marketing.

But this is not the calling of the church. The church is not supposed to take over culture, or transform culture, or avoid culture. We are simply to be a faithful presence in the world, while we make our way to our final home. The church is a pilgrim church.

Here in Hebrews 13, at the very end of the book, the writer makes it clear that embracing Jesus as the Author and Finisher of the faith will not place you in the centre of the world’s power structures of wealth or politics or fame. Back in 1943 a man by the name of E. H. Broadbent wrote a church history book called “The Pilgrim Church” in which he showed that the church has always been a faithful minority persecuted either by Judaism, Christendom, or the wider culture.

The church is a pilgrim people. He’s told us how to love one another, but now he wants us to understand how to think about and treat the church. If we are going to draw near to Christ, and be faithful to the finish to the Finisher of the faith, we must not be under false illusions regarding what the church is, and how it functions. In that light, the church must embrace its position, embrace its privileges, and embrace its pastors.

I. Embrace the Position of the Pilgrim Church

11 For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. 12 Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. 13 Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. 14 For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.

In verse 8-10, he compares New Testament sacrifices to Old Testament sacrifices. That leads him to these verses, where he tells us where the carcasses of the animals used for certain sacrifices were disposed of outside the camp. In the case of the sin offering, and in the case of the sin offering for the priest and the people on the Day of Atonement, the animal was not burnt on the burnt altar in

the Tabernacle, but outside the camp.

Remember, Israel marched as a large company. In the centre was the rectangular Tabernacle. Around it on four sides were four sections of Levites, Gershon, Merari, Kohath and Moses & Priests. Around them on four sides were the Tribes of Israel in four groups of three tribes each, three on the north, three on the south, three on the east, and three on the west. So the camp was a rectangle, with obvious boundaries.

Lepers were also to dwell outside of the camp. Those who became ritually unclean through touching a corpse or some kind of bodily emission, were to be temporarily outside the camp. The man who was heard blaspheming in Leviticus 24 was taken outside the camp and executed. The man caught gathering sticks on the Sabbath day in Numbers 15 was taken outside the camp and executed. Refuse and human waste was always to be disposed of outside the camp. So what Israel would have understood was that whatever was holy and pure and clean was in the centre of the camp, and whatever was corrupting and defiling and unclean was to be pushed out, thrown out, excluded from the camp.

Now the writer sees one more fulfillment of the types and offerings of the Old Testament in Jesus having been crucified outside of Jerusalem:

12 Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate.

Golgotha, or mount Calvary was very likely a hill against which some of the walls of Herod's Jerusalem was built. Roman crucifixions would have taken place somewhat near the city garbage and sewage dump – The Valley of Hinnom, or Gehenna, because the bodies were not usually buried, but simply thrown onto the pile of festering and rotting refuse.

The writer is seeing a parallel. Jesus was taken outside the city, similar to being outside the camp. He was taken to where those things that defile are taken, where criminals were executed, where some of the offerings were disposed of, where the red heifer was killed. Why? In the world's eyes, it was because He was the criminal, the blasphemer, the Sabbath breaker, the moral leper. He was outcast. But it was also because He was the true atoning sacrifice, perfect in Himself, who died to sanctify us. His own blood, representing His own perfect, undefiled life, suffered in the place of defilement and rejection, so that the people might be saved. Far from being unholy, Jesus died to make us holy!

So what does this mean for us? 13 Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. 14 For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.

God made no mistake in having His Son die on a cross of shame, in a place of shame. God signified that to follow His Son is to go where He is, to take up your cross and follow Him. 26 "If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor. (Jn. 12:26)

Mat 10:24 "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household!

To become a Christian is not only to embrace the Cross for your salvation, it means you embrace the Cross for your identity. The Cross means rejection, scorn, disgrace in the eyes of the world. The writer says, we go to where He is, outside Mancity, outside Vanity Fair, outside SatanKingdom. And since that is where we find Him, we then share and willingly carry the rejection, the mocking, the ridicule, the shame of being identified with Him. The reason we can do this is that this world

does not offer us a home.

Verse 14 says, that Christians don't have a permanent, lasting, enduring city here. There is no Christian country we can all emigrate to. There is no capital city of Christianity. One day, there will be a Christian country- Israel. One day, people from around the world will want to go to Messiah's country. One day, the city which cannot be shaken, the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (Heb. 11:10) will come to Earth, and be our home. But that is not the case now.

Now the church is a pilgrim people. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, (Phil. 3:20).

11 Beloved, I beg *you* as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, (1 Pet. 2:11)

Heb 11:13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

To the first readers of this epistle, the application was obvious. Break with Judaism. Jerusalem still has a Temple, but Jesus was crucified outside of it. Embrace the rejection and danger that will come from leaving the Roman-licensed religion of Judaism, and leaving all the approval of friends and family and nation, and go to Jesus. Embrace your status as a pilgrim people: misunderstood, rejected, cast out.

For all of us, it means that to be a pilgrim people, we must break with the culture of this world. God calls on His people to be separate from worldliness. 17 Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you." 18 "I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty." (2 Cor. 6:17-18)

Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. (Jas. 4:4)

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. (1 Jn. 2:15)

19 "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. (Jn. 15:19-20)

You cannot be popular in school, popular in college, unless there is something about your faith that you conceal, disguise, edit, censor. You cannot travel effortlessly through every social situation in the world and fit in seamlessly, unless you are a spiritual chameleon, a man-pleaser who has mastered the art of echoing back and parroting whoever he or she is with.

Embrace the position. We are a pilgrim people. But it is not all negative. The second thing we should do is:

II. Embrace the Privileges of the Pilgrim Church

8 Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday, today, and forever. 9 Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. For *it is* good that the heart be established by grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them. 10 We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.

Yesterday, today, forever, Jesus is the same. **Rev 1:8** "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End," says the Lord, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Believers serve the same Jesus, who walked with Adam, appeared to Abraham, led Moses, was revealed to Isaiah, was born in Bethlehem, lived in Nazareth, preached in Galilee, died in Jerusalem, and has been building His church for 1987 years. That leads the writer to encourage us not to get distracted by weird, and usually novel doctrines. Don't be distracted by someone who claims some ancient but lost knowledge, or some new and hitherto unknown knowledge. We don't know exactly what he was referring to in his context. It could have ascetics who told people to abstain from foods. It could have been early Gnostic doctrines about the body. It could have been hardcore Jewish legalists who emphasised the need to present Temple sacrifices. The immutability of Jesus speaks of the consistency of the Gospel.

In 2020, we are not unfamiliar with various and strange doctrines. Today, it seems there is a new one on the Internet every day. And Christians are still in danger of being led away by some new conspiracy theory, some new hidden Bible code, some new prophecy, some new end-times theory. There are no shortage of people telling you that everyone else has got it wrong, or that everyone in church history for 2000 years has got it wrong, and finally, now that they have been born, truth and light have dawned on the human race.

These weird ideas and practices did not profit the people occupied with them. They did not save them, and it did not grow them in holiness. They were actually underprivileged. And indeed, look at the fruit of those who are always pursuing some speculative theory, some brand new take on theology, some odd and eclectic take on the faith once for all delivered to the saints. What is patently obvious is that it does not profit those people.

2 Timothy 2:14 Remind *them* of these things, charging *them* before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers. (2 Tim. 2:14)

2Ti 2:23 But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife.

1Ti 1:4 nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith.

Tit 3:9-11 But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless.

By contrast, he says, we believers have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. What does he mean? He means that just as Jewish believers no longer had the right to go to the Temple's altar, so the Jewish unbelievers did not have the right to experience the sacrifices of Christianity. What is this altar? He certainly cannot mean the altar of the Lord's Supper. It is not an altar; it is a table. That is precisely the error: attempting to bring Temple and priest and sacrifice back into the church. He means it as a metaphor. As those Old Testament Jews ate some of the sacrifices they offered, we in turn have the privilege of having Christ's Cross as our altar, and Christ's life as our nourishment and food. Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us.

This is another way of saying what is said in verse 9: our hearts should be established by grace. What is this grace? It means the message of the Gospel, the message of Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith is where our security and strength and hope lies. Look back at 12:28: Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. (Heb. 12:28)

The pilgrim church enjoys the privilege of the Gospel of grace. We go out, but we go out to where Jesus is. In fact, before the Tabernacle was constructed, after the Golden Calf incident, Moses set up the Tent of Meeting outside the camp, and those who wanted to meet with God had to go out the camp to fellowship with God. This is our privilege of the pilgrim church.

The pilgrim church is not looking for a new gospel, or some new technique, or some novel take on

doctrine. No, the pilgrim church has the privilege of having heard the gospel of grace, and we are happy to let it do its work on us, establishing us.

1 John 2:24 Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. (1 Jn. 2:24)

The privilege of the pilgrim church is a Gospel of free grace, that gives us free access to our God. We are not bound to a place, beholden to a human priesthood, dependent on some system to atone for us. We are not pursuing a hidden Gospel, a secret message held only by the elite. Ours is an old, old story, told openly and publicly for 2000 years. It's a message that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

So what do you do with this privilege of freely received, unearned grace? The ironic thing, and yet the fitting thing is this: you freely give! You give something to God, and something to man.

15 Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *our* lips, giving thanks to His name. 16 But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

In stark contrast to the once for all sacrifice of Jesus, we now give a continual sacrifice. But it is not an act of payment to God. The pilgrim church is not trying to earn its salvation through penances, or through works or through some kind of merit. Instead, with our hearts established by grace, we are full and overflowing with gratitude. So what do we do? In the name of Jesus, and by His power, we present our sacrifice. It is not an animal. It is not money. It is heartfelt, grateful, praise. The fruit, the work of our lips, giving praise to Him. It is thanksgiving. It is a voluntary act of love: praising, adoring and thanking God. Every Lord's Day together, and every day individually.

But think for a moment about that word *sacrifice*. David said he would not offer to the Lord that which cost him nothing. Mary broke open costly perfume worth a year's salary on Jesus' feet. Our sacrifice of praise is free, because it is rooted in grace, but it is not cheap. We should choose our words carefully. We should sing the best hymns. We should present our best music. We should put effort and thought and planning into our praise so that it is a sacrifice.

In the name of being relevant and contemporary and real, too much praise today is simply sloppy, casual, and cheap. It is a tacky gift, the mere leftovers of our efforts, like the one-eyed lambs and crippled goats the Israelites were giving God in Malachi's day. It's a free sacrifice, but it should still be valuable.

Our second sacrifice here is giving to each other. To do good: serving, helping, encouraging, blessing. Sharing – time, resources, money, counsel. This is simply Christian fellowship, and Christian love. The greater the rejection and persecution from the world, the greater should be the love and support for one another.

This is the privilege of the pilgrim church. We are free. Freed by grace, and so free to praise, and free to serve. Free to love God, and free to love one another.

That's our position, and our privilege. But he has one more thing to say about church life.

III. Embrace the Pastors of the Pilgrim Church

Three times in Hebrews 13, he mentions those who “rule over you”.

7 Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct.

17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

24 Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints. (Heb. 13:24)

Who are these people? They obviously don't refer to civil or secular rulers. It says in verse 7 that they spoke the Word of God to you and set an example of faith. In verse 17 it says that they watch out for your souls and will one day have to give an account for how they did so and for you.

He is referring to the leaders in the local church: the pastors, and derivatively, those who assist the pastors, the deacons.

Why does he bring this up here? Because if a church is truly a pilgrim church, leading it is not an easy task. If the church is a business, then it just needs some market-savvy CEO-types. If the church is an organ of the state supported by taxes, then it just needs bureaucrats happy to get a government pension. If the church is an entertainment venue then it needs actors, comedians and performers. But if the church is going to be rejected by society, out of the mainstream, then it needs leaders who are willing to lead that sort of organisation. As 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5 say, they can't be in it for the money. They can't be cowards and man-pleasers. They need to be people who will take on a hard task and look to a reward beyond this life. And if those leaders are rare, their endurance is even rarer. The average pastor lasts 6 years in one church.

So the three exhortations say to, if you are a pilgrim church, and enjoy your pilgrim privileges, then know that your leaders need you to assist them in their task. Don't scuttle your own ship by wearing out your leaders. These three verses give you three ways to

First, he says you should think about them and imitate them. He may be referring to leaders who had already died, and he may be referring to those still alive. We now have 2000 years of church history to consider the fruit of the lives of different ones. We can see their flaws and their successes. We can weed out the bad, and imitate the good. But leaders are there to provide an example. Much of the faith is taught, but much of the faith is caught. You watch and see and copy. This is why the Bible insists that leaders have a certain character and a certain kind of family life because God's people are supposed to see something worth copying.

By the way, this is one of the way to evaluate movements in church history. What was the fruit of the Wesleyans, the Pentecostals, the Presbyterians, the Baptists, the Brethren, the Puritans, the Fundamentalists, the charismatics. What did it produce? What were the leaders like, and their families, the lives of the followers?

It's fair and right to ask: what is the outcome of the life my leaders are living? What are their marriage like? How is their parenting working? How are their finances managed? What is their speech and attitude and moral life like? Is it winsome and working? And when it is, it is good for God's people to say, "I'd like to do that, too. How do you do that?"

17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

Second, he says obey them, and submit to them. In other words, as they teach God's Word to you, and make applications, obey. A pastor's authority does not go beyond God's Word. But this command suggests that at least sometimes Christians are going to have contrary opinions to their

leaders. And in those moments, except where it is truly a matter of conscience, the Bible says, submit. At the point of disagreement, surrender your opinion and preference to the greater good of the church. Submission, as we always say, begins at the point of disagreement. Agreement is great, but it is just cooperation. Submission is a voluntary yielding to another's teaching, another's counsel another's direction. What's the point of calling someone a leader if you can select the times you're going to obey? That's a toothless tiger, a defanged and declawed authority, a figurehead, who gives a lecture to everyone in general and no one in particular.

He tells you why. First, they watch for your souls, and you want them to do that with joy. Pastors care for individuals, not crowds. We pray for you by name and look to the state of your soul. We're looking out for the threats to you, as well as the nourishing and healthy things. We look to see the fruit manifesting from your life. We preach and pray and counsel and lead. We are trying to protect you from harming yourself or wasting your life.

That kind of oversight is a joy, but it has its heartbreaks and griefs too. What the writer has in mind here is that the person who digs in his heels, argues about everything, questions everything, is a headache. This is the person who either never asks for counsel, or ignores counsel, does not submit to the Word, consequently messes up his life, and then demands emergency help from the leaders to pick up the pieces. He brings grief.

The writer says, there is no profit to you if your leaders are discouraged, weary, and unhappy. Groaning, unhappy leaders in the church are like reluctant leaders anywhere: they want to get out, they want to give up, they want to withdraw into some place with less responsibility. Any pastor on a bad day is going to feel that way, but he shakes it off and continues on with joy. The problems come when the rebellion and stubbornness of the people he leads begins to become the majority and the norm.

A second reason to submit is that they are going to give an account. They have burden of accounting for their own shepherding, and the burden of reporting on you. It is of no profit to you if at the judgement seat of Christ, the Lord asks your pastor about you, and your pastor rolls his eyes and says, "Oh, yes, him!" That certainly won't help you, though God knows you better than your pastor ever will. But he also knows if you grieved his undershepherds and generally made life miserable for them, and God cares for his undershepherds too. Some churches are pastor-eaters, and one day they will answer for it.

Imitate them, submit to them, and the third thing he tells you is in verse 24.

24 Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints. (Heb. 13:24)

Greet them. Simply, be on happy, friendly, speaking terms with them. There should be no avoiding, no cold shouldering, no behind the scenes grumbling between leaders and members. Be on happy, welcoming, speaking terms. When there's an issue, get it out on the table, deal with it, and be able to greet each other warmly and sincerely the next time you see each other.

"How many churches languish today in an evil combination of selfish leaders and stubborn members? Such congregations usually shrink and wither away. Some churches have wonderful congregations, but they have recognized the wrong people as pastors and elders, people who show themselves to be at best careless and stupid, and at worst, base charlatans. Some churches have wonderful, godly leaders, but congregations full of complacent, self-centred people. If such a pastor can stay and patiently teach, the congregation can be renewed. If not, such a congregation will, I think, bear a heavy judgement on the final day for wounding good under-shepherds of the flock of Christ.

But the healthy church, though filled with imperfect members and leaders, is marked by godly initiative and service, godly teaching and obedience, godly leadership and membership." – Mark Dever

The church is a pilgrim people. If you're saved you already know that. Keep embracing your position. But we are privileged people to be so loved, and so free. So embrace the privilege. Enjoy the Gospel of grace, and from the outflow, present the sacrifice of loving praise to God, and the sacrifice of loving fellowship to other believers. And then encourage those pastors and deacons who model the faith with imitation, submission and friendship.