



Numbers 2-4

The tendency to engage in worship wars is not new. In chapters 2 to 4 we have the instructions regarding the role of the Levites for the desert journey. A word of caution at the outset: when we read these chapters, the prevailing sense of adventure is more Indiana Jones than a dry instruction manual. If we think that Spirit-filled worship is a matter of merely ticking the right boxes, then we haven't begun to understand it.

The early chapters of Numbers are largely a list of names. As you go through the list you notice that the Levites are dealt with separately. Why? They were not eligible to serve in the army. We must not make the mistake of thinking that the Levites were not involved in the struggles, suggesting that working full-time in the work of worship is a lesser task. In 4:23 the Gershonites (a division of the Levites) are said to 'serve' in the Tent of Meeting. The word 'serve' can just as easily be translated 'do warfare'. There is a warfare involved in worship, and indeed those closest to the centre of the action sometimes attract the most hostile fire. The Levite today is not your minister, it's you! Do you also remember that in Exodus 32, after the incident of the golden calf, Moses asked, 'who is on the Lord's side?' At that point all the Levites rallied to him. The principle is seen that faithful service to God is often rewarded by greater responsibilities and further opportunities to serve. From the specific role of the Levites we can see that there is no more important element of our Christian lives than worship. It is not part of our Christian life – it is that life.

There is nothing as important in life as our spiritual lives

There were 22,000 Levites. All these men were pulled out of fighting to tend to the spiritual services of the tabernacle (3:5-9). Was this not a waste of strong and fit men? The community invested their money in order that the worship of God might be carried out among them. Although all believers now are priests, we cannot ignore the application to full-time Christian ministry today. In Ephesians 4:8 the ascended Christ gave gifts to men: some apostles, some evangelists and some teachers. It was not a waste of talent for Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones to give up Harley Street to minister to the deprived dirty steel town of Port Talbot. Are we prepared to sacrifice our material needs to maintain worship in our communities?

In our spiritual lives there is nothing as important as worship

Look at what the Levites did. They were to encamp around the tent of meeting (2:1) to ensure that people did not approach God in a flippant or irreverent manner. Any non-Levite who approached the tent was to be put to death by the Levitical guard. The worship of God is always a serious matter. It seems that today the most popular question in churches is 'how can we get them in?' The solemn matter of worship is never decided by opinion polls, but it is regulated by Scripture. God still asks today, 'Have I required this?'

Notice also a couple of things. The tent was located in the centre of the community (2:17). God was near them. This was astounding at that time (see Deuteronomy 4:7). God is not far from each of us. There is, however, a paradox because although God is near, He is also far away: they were to camp at a distance from the tabernacle (2:2). We need to get this balance between the immanence of God and the transcendence of God. If we emphasise His immanence, we drift into casualness; but if we emphasise His transcendence, we end up with remoteness. The prevailing mood of contemporary evangelicalism seems to tend toward the 'God as big buddy' model. Os Guinness speaks of meeting a Japanese CEO in Australia. This was his observation on our Christianity: 'When I meet a Buddhist monk, I meet a holy man in touch with another world. When I

meet a Western missionary, I meet a manager who is only in touch with the world I know.' Guinness reflects, *'You could say that many, many Christians are atheists unaware.'*

In worship there is nothing as important as obedience

Look at the repeated refrain *'as the Lord commanded Moses'* (1:54, 2:33, 34). These chapters in Numbers make the point that in worship, obedience is much more important than pragmatism or pandering to our feelings. Whatever God told the people to do, they did without question. The role of obedience in the whole of our lives is critical; the evidence of knowing God is obeying God. It is not easy to obey God; although Jesus could not be disobedient, He had to learn obedience.

These chapters provide us with a great vision: families led by an army of godly men, a society with worship at its centre, and a people obeying the Lord just as He commanded.

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