

## A CALLED OUT PEOPLE\*

When God called the people of Israel out of Egypt, He set them apart from all other nations. Now, through our eternal Passover in Christ, God calls us out of every nation, tribe, and tongue to be His special people.

*Revelation 5:9-10: And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and **with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.** You have made them to be **a kingdom and priests to serve our God,** and they will reign on the earth."*

*Ephesians 3:10-11: **His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,** according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The word translated as "church" in the New Testament is the Greek word *ekklesia* which literally means "a called out people." God has called us out of this world to be His. We are a nation of people who have pledged our eternal allegiance to the same King – Jesus.

In the days of Jesus, Greek was the predominant language in the world. The word *ekklesia* was commonly used to describe the assembly of citizens in any given Greek city. In those days, citizenship was a special class of people with rights above those of non-citizens and slaves who were the property of their masters. *Ekklesia* was the word for the governmental assembly of the city, including officers who had authority over judicial matters for city politics and civil issues or disputes. For example, in Acts 19, the word *ekklesia* is used to describe the assembly in Ephesus of city leaders and citizens who wanted to put the Apostle Paul on trial for proclaiming Jesus and interfering with their idol making businesses.

For the first followers of Jesus, the concept of being a called out people of God with their own rights of governance was nothing new. Throughout the Old Testament, the word *qahal* is used to describe the whole assembly of the people of Israel who worshipped the same God, were governed by the same laws, and served the same king. (In today's Hebrew, congregations are referred to as *kehilla*, from this same word.) God's intent was that through the people of Israel following His laws, His righteousness and power would be displayed through their wisdom and justice. (See Deuteronomy 4:5-8.) Even when their land and lives were ruled or dominated by other nations, they sought diligently to maintain their right to govern themselves according to God's laws of worship and justice.

Now, when Jesus calls us to discipleship, He is calling us out of the world to belong to Him, to learn and live by His ways, and to follow Him with total loyalty to Him and His Kingdom. We have become the *ekklesia* of God, the New Covenant *qahal* of God, and citizens of heaven. (See Philippians 3:20.) We bow to no other king but Jesus. We are an autonomously governed body of people who have been delegated authority by our King to rule over judicial matters and disputes for those within His Body. We obey the rules of whatever land we live in as long as they do not conflict with our obedience to our King Jesus. We do not try to help the people of this world live better lives or be better people. We call them out of the kingdom of this world to be a part of the Kingdom of God. (Consider Acts 4:24-30.) Our goal is not to "start a church," "attend church" every weekend, or raise money for "church buildings." Jesus builds His church upon the fact that He is King.

*Matthew 16:16-19: Simon Peter answered, "**You are the Messiah [King], the Son of the living God.**" Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you*

*by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and **on this rock I will build my church [ekklesia], and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.***"

The Church is built by Jesus. The Church is built upon the rock solid truth that Jesus is King – the Messiah who God promised for the redemption of mankind and who rules the earth for all eternity. Jesus died on a cross, descended into Hades [Hell] and was raised again to eternal life and freedom. The gates of Hell **did not** prevail against Him and they will not prevail against God's ekklesia. Hallelujah!

In His resurrection, Jesus attained the keys to the Kingdom of heaven. The gates of heaven had been locked shut due to man's sinfulness and the key to the lock was perfect righteousness. Jesus unlocked heaven for us through His righteousness according to God's Law so that we gain access to God through faith in Him. Hallelujah! Yet, Jesus did not keep the keys to Himself. In the passage above, He explicitly told His disciples ahead of time that He would give the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven to them, including authority to bind and to loose.

### **BINDING AND LOOSING**

Binding and loosing was not a new concept for the first followers of Jesus and their understanding of being the ekklesia or called out people of God. Through the Old Covenant, it was the priests, scribes, religious leaders, and experts in God's Law who held the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven because they had the God-given right to determine what was allowed and what was forbidden.

Binding and loosing are legal terms for the establishment of that which is forbidden and that which is permitted. To *bind* is to impose a requirement and render it binding, meaning the people are bound to adhere to the requirement of face consequences. To *loose* is to allow/permit behaviors and render the people loosed from legal consequence and relieved from obligation.

God's intent and aim was always access to Him through righteousness so that His people could know Him and be His Kingdom. Unfortunately, the religious authorities enforced so many of their own binding regulations that they made it impossible for anyone to enter the Kingdom of God, including themselves. (See Matthew 23:13.) But now, we the Church have been given the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven through Christ-given authority to bind and to loose.

An example of this was demonstrated when the early apostles, elders, and disciples gathered together at the Jerusalem Council. The hot topic of theological debate in that day was whether or not a Gentile follower of Jesus should be required to be circumcised as evidence of their inclusion in God's people. To require circumcision would be to bind people in obligation to be circumcised, to not require circumcision would loose people from the obligation.

Significantly, the issues addressed at the Jerusalem Council all pertain to inclusion or expulsion from God's people. Circumcision was the sign of inclusion in God's Covenant since the days of Abraham and is included in the Law of Moses. However, under the New Covenant, to require obedience to one Law is equal to necessitating compliance with the entirety of the Law. (See James 2:10.) Any requirement other than faith in Jesus Christ is not the New Covenant which was sealed with the blood of Christ. We have been loosed from the legal obligation to obey the Law of Moses and all things are permitted for us. (See 1 Corinthians 6:12, 10:23.) Righteousness and access to God is attained by grace through faith in Jesus Christ as a free gift not because of what we do or do not do. (See Ephesians 2:8.)

This said, the Law of God is good and explicitly details God's standard of purity in the event that there is any confusion about what is pleasing to Him. (See 1 Timothy 1:9-11; Romans 7:12.) Therefore, at the Jerusalem Council the apostles and elders agreed that in order to reveal God's holiness to those who do not yet believe that Jesus is Lord, it was important to bind believers under obligation to abstain from eating food offered to idols, from eating blood, and from sexual immorality. (For God's definition of sexual immorality, see Leviticus, Chapter 18.) Because these things were strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses

and punishable by death, any Jew would find it difficult to accept the Gospel message of Jesus from someone doing these things while claiming to follow the Jewish Messiah and worship the God of Israel.

This means that living by the New Covenant standard of faith does not contradict the Old Covenant standard but rather gives us supernatural power to uphold the Law which is written upon our hearts by doing what is pleasing to God. (See Romans 3:31.) This is a demonstration that followers of Jesus are truly called out from this world and its ways. Proclaiming the Gospel with our mouths is easy, but it is how we conduct our lives as God's holy people that tells the watching world about the God we serve.

At the Jerusalem Council, the apostles and elders established these regulations, not to require obedience to the Old Covenant in any way but, to keep believers in the New Covenant aligned with God's will for their lives so that everyone who believes can receive all that has been promised through faith in Christ, both in this age and in the age to come. Unlike the religious leaders of the old system, the apostles and elders did not make it difficult for believers to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Praise God!

As a quick side note, at one point in his travels Paul had Timothy circumcised, which would seem to be a contradiction of the decision of the Jerusalem Council. Timothy's mother was Jewish which qualified him as an Israelite (Jewishness passes through the mother because paternity was impossible to prove in those days) but his father was Gentile, which was why he had not been circumcised previously. In order to not cause a big fuss among the unbelieving Jews and new converts to Christianity in the cities on their itinerary, Paul exercised willing deference so that Jesus Christ could be the primary focus of conversation, not circumcision. However, Paul utterly refused to force Titus, who had been born 100% Gentile, to be circumcised in order to be accepted into the faith. (See Acts 16:1-3; Galatians 2:3; Book of Titus.)

## CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Jesus also taught His disciples about the binding and loosing authority of the ekklesia in the context of conflict resolution. This included expulsion or admittance to the Church (forbidding or allowing) and addressing sin within the called out people of God.

*Matthew 18:15-18: **If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church [ekklisia]; and if they refuse to listen even to the church [ekklisia], treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.***

According to this teaching, sin in the community and conflicts between believers should respectfully escalate step-by-step. First, the offended parties meet privately to address the situation. Next, one or two other believers are included as witnesses. If the person still will not listen, the matter is brought to the authority of the church/ekklisia for a verdict. Finally, if the offender will not heed the decision of church leadership, they are to be expelled from the ekklesia and treated like an unbeliever and traitor.

The church at Corinth experienced this when a believer was caught continually having sexual relations with his father's wife. He was expelled from the church and turned over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh. (See 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 9-13.) But let us consider how we treat unbelievers and enemies of God. We proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and salvation by grace through faith for all sinners who repent. Therefore, when the man in Corinth was truly repentant for his sin, the Corinthian church reinstated, welcomed, and comforted him so that he would not be overly discouraged or eternally damned. (See 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.)

It is not a coincidence that in this same passage where Jesus taught about binding and loosing, or admittance and expulsion due to sin, He explained that offenses between believers are minor by comparison to the way that all of us have sinned against God. (See Matthew 18:21-35.) If the financial figures in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant were converted to modern day equivalents, God paid

our debt of 10,000 talents (multi-billion dollar debt.) Conflicts between believers amount to 100 denarii (several thousand dollars.) Releasing someone who hurts or offends us from such a small amount is a disproportionately low expectation if we truly understand what Jesus has done for us. Jesus could have come to avenge all of our wrongs against God but instead He came to give His life so that we could be forgiven and live free. In fact, this is the ministry we have been called to as God's called out ones – the ministry of reconciliation. God's desire is to reconcile people to Himself by not holding their sins against them through their faith in the blood of Jesus. (See 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.) As God's called out people and as governed by the Holy Spirit, God has given us the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven including authority in the earth to forgive sins.

*John 20:22-23: And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. **If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.***

When Jesus was on the cross being crucified, He pleaded, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." (See Luke 23:34.) Similarly, Stephen said almost the same thing when unbelievers were stoning him for telling them Jesus is the Messiah. (See Acts 7:60.) The Apostle Paul also extended mercy to everyone who abandoned him when he met with trials and intense persecution. (See 2 Timothy 4:16.)

Moreover, Paul rebuked believers sharply for not being able to peaceably resolve disputes between themselves and even more so for taking their disputes to the court system of this world. He emphasized that it is more important for us to learn to forgive one another, allow ourselves to be wronged, and live out the teachings of Jesus to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and give our cloak to the one who steals our tunic. (See 1 Corinthians 6:1-11; Matthew 5:39-41.)

However, when it came to false teachers who opposed the work of God with destructive heresies which caused confusion and dissention in the Church, Paul had no mercy. He named them by name and by the authority given to him by God for the ekklesia, expelled them from the people of God, turning them over to Satan so that they could learn not to blaspheme. (See 1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 2:17-19, 4:14-15.)

### **APPOINTING LEADERS IN THE EKKLESIA**

Jesus builds His Church on the truth that He is King. Jesus also appoints the leaders of His Church in order for them to carry out His commands in the earth and execute justice among His people.

The first 120 followers of Jesus knew the significance of God's sovereign selection for positions of leadership. Even without the Holy Spirit which had not been poured out yet, they knew that the decision was not theirs to make and so they cast lots to hear from God. (See Acts 1:12-26.) Significantly, they would have known from the Hebrews Scriptures how the prophet Samuel had been instructed by God to appoint only the leaders whom God selected due to the fact that God looks at the heart of a person and not the outward appearances or apparent qualifications. (See 1 Samuel 9:15-17, 16:3,7,12.)

A little while later in the Church's earliest history as the Church grew in Jerusalem, arguments broke out between believers and disharmony set in due to inequitable distribution of food. The apostles knew that it would not be right for them to allow this issue to divert their focus from the Word of God and prayer and so they appointed Deacons. (See Acts 6:3-7.) The word for *deacon* is the same word used for a *waiter* and, practically speaking, they served the needs of God's people. Deacons were nominated by the people based on their exemplary lives of service to God. As the Gospel spread, the position of Deacon became a common function in Church life and the Apostle Paul gave various guidelines for ensuring the genuineness of any nominee's faith, lifestyle, and service. (See 1 Timothy 3:8-13; Titus 1:5-9.)

As churches were formed and became established in various cities, the apostles selected and appointed *elders* in each church. (See Acts 14:21-23.) After selecting the elders to be appointed, the apostles prayed and laid hands on the elders in order to share their governing authority over God's people with them for their city. Elders assisted the apostles by presiding over the Church in their local area, with particular care for financial and theological matters and protecting the local flock from false teachers. (See Acts 20:17-

28.) The Apostle Paul also gave guidelines for the character qualities required for those serving in the function of elder. (See 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 5:17-25; Titus 1:5-9.)

All of this was in accordance with the model of the Old Testament since the days of Moses. At the advice of his father-in-law, Moses selected men of integrity who feared the Lord and hated a bribe to share the burden of governing the people and judging the local and/or smaller cases in matters of justice. Later, seventy of these men were appointed by God as the elders of Israel when God shared with the elders the same spirit that was on Moses so that they could govern and judge according to God's ways. (See Exodus 18:13-26; Numbers 11:10-29.)

In addition to deacons and elders, the Holy Spirit also revealed to listening believers the foreordained plans of God for individuals within their midst. As this happened, these people were set apart so that God could fulfill His purposes through them for His Church and His Kingdom.

*Acts 13:2-3: While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, **the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."** So after they had fasted and prayed, **they placed their hands on them and sent them off.***

It is noteworthy that the God's people did not determine God's call upon anyone's life but, rather, recognized and confirmed God's pre-existing purpose. Examples of this pattern include David, who was anointed to be the King of Israel many years before he was appointed King, (See 1 Samuel 16:13; 2 Samuel 2:11, 5:1-4;) Jeremiah, who was called by God as a prophet before forming Jeremiah was formed in his mother's womb, (Jeremiah 1:5;) and Paul, who was chosen as an apostle of God before the foundation of the earth, anointed as an apostle when he first came to faith in Jesus Christ, and appointed as an apostle when the Church at Antioch sent him on his first missionary journey. (See Galatians 1:15; Acts 9:15.) Once God's purpose was revealed by the Holy Spirit, believers fasted and prayed, laid hands on God's chosen ones and sent them on their way.

## LAYING ON OF HANDS

The laying on of hands is another practice which is prevalent throughout the Scriptures as a method of transferring blessing, imparting spiritual gifts, and appointing the leaders of God's people. In the Old Testament, Jacob laid hands on the heads of Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh to adopt them as his own children and to bless them, and then he prophesied about their lives and their descendants. (See Genesis 48:1-22.) Later, Moses laid his hands on Joshua to impart, or transfer, his anointing of wisdom for leading the people of Israel so that Joshua became his successor. (See Numbers 27:12-23; Deuteronomy 34:9.) When the tribe of Levi was selected by God for the work of ministering to Him and to the Tabernacle, all of Israel gathered together and laid hands on the Levites in order to demonstrate that the Levites served God on their behalf. (See Numbers 8:5-15.) When the High Priest blessed the people of Israel, he raised his hands with his palms towards the people to symbolize that he was laying his hands on all of them in order to bless them. (See Leviticus 9:22; Numbers 6:22-27.)

Now, in the New Covenant, the laying on of hands continues and is used to consecrate believers with Christ's perfect righteousness, to fill one another with the Holy Spirit, to impart spiritual gifts, to heal the sick, and to set believers apart for God's special tasks.

*Acts 9:12, 17: In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and **place his hands on him to restore his sight.**" ... Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. **Placing his hands on Saul**, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord--Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here--has sent me **so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.**"*

*Acts 19:6: **When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.** (See also Acts 8:17.)*

*1 Timothy 4:14: Do not neglect your gift, which was **given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.** (See also 2 Timothy 1:6.)*

Mark 16:17-18: *And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; **they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.***

Acts 28:8: *His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, **placed his hands on him and healed him.***

Through the laying on of hands as prompted by the Holy Spirit, God's chosen ones were appointed to their God-given missions, callings, and tasks. Some people worked within the Church, some were sent out by the Church, and as everyone did their part, God's purpose was fulfilled in the earth. This said, the Apostle Paul warned not to be hasty in laying hands on people to appoint them to positions of authority within the Church. If their lives are full of sin and they are given authority to govern others through the laying on of hands, then those who laid hands share some level of responsibility for the damage their sin causes within the Body. (See 1 Timothy 5:22.)

Being appointed by to a position of leadership within the Church is a serious responsibility of eternal weight. We cannot take it lightly or treat it like a position of leadership in this world. For example, before the crucifixion, Jesus' disciples were constantly competing to hold the top place of power and authority in His ministry. But after Jesus' resurrection, none of them ever competed for greatness again, and each one of them went on to serve God with all they had and eventually give their lives in the cause of spreading the word that Jesus is King.

*Matthew 20:25-28: Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave--** just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (See also Matthew 23:8-11; Mark 10:35-45; Luke 9:46-48; James 3:16-17.)*

The Christian life is not a democracy, it is a monarchy. Jesus is King. May we be eager to serve our King and serve others as He leads us. If we are in leadership, may we walk in reverence and submission to God in all of our thoughts, words, and actions. May the Church come into fullness as the called out people of God in righteousness, mercy, and speaking the truth in love so that the world will see that Jesus is King.

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