

Set Apart for the Lord's Work

Numbers 8:5–14

In our text this morning the LORD instructs Moses to ceremonially cleanse the Levites, setting them apart from the other tribes of Israel to dedicate their lives to serving the LORD in the tabernacle service. Here we have a ceremony to set apart and ordain the Levites for the Lord's work.

The ordination of the priests was described in Leviticus 8. I am going to spend a few minutes talking about that text. There in Leviticus 8:1–12 (esp. v. 12) we learn about the ordination of the priests. There it is explained that Moses washed Aaron and his sons with water, then clothed them with the priestly garments. The wearing of priestly garments is significant. It is kind of like a judge in a human court, wearing judicial robes, or a policeman on a street, wearing the uniform of a police officer. A judge or a police officer's wearing of a uniform is significant and meaningful.

The other day our presbytery received a minister who is being called as an evangelist in our church in Vineland, Ontario, near Niagara Falls. The man's name is John Nymann. He was called to the gospel ministry later in life, after having served more than fifteen years as a police officer. I do not recall any other of our ministers who had been police officers. He said that he wrote a lot of tickets when he was a policeman, and met a lot of people. He said that he enjoys meeting people and telling them about Christ. When he resigned as a police officer he took off his police uniform in order to study for the Christian ministry.

A police officer or judge does not wear a uniform all the time. He does not wear it when he is at home, playing with the kids. He puts on his uniform when he goes to work. When a judge sits at his bench or a police officer patrols his beat, he is in uniform. A formal name for uniform is *vestment*. To be approved for office and put on a uniform for the first time is called *investiture*.

Now the Reformed churches are divided on whether a minister should wear a special robe when he leads worship. (This is part of the circumstances of worship, not an element of worship.) Wearing a special robe certainly was required of the priests in Old Testament times. But when the Lord Jesus preached during his earthly ministry, and went to the cross to die for our sins, he did not wear special clothing. When he was arrested, he had only one garment—the everyday robe of a poor working man. He certainly did not have the gorgeous vestments used in the Roman, Anglican and Lutheran churches, let alone the simple black robe used by some Reformed pastors. Those who wear such robes say it gives dignity to their office. Those who do not wear robes point to our Lord himself, who did not wear a special robe.

But the underlying issue is this: when a minister of the gospel, or an elder or deacon, exercise the functions of their office, they are not acting as private persons

but as servants of Christ. When a preacher preaches on behalf of Christ, he is required to preach only what is taught in the Bible, and nothing more. He is not allowed to teach and preach his own opinions or his own hobby horses. He is to preach the whole counsel of God—everything taught in the Bible or properly deduced from the Bible. Nothing more! When ministers and elders sit in a judicial capacity in a court of the church, the moderator announces: “This body is about to sit in a judicial capacity, and I exhort you, the members, to bear in mind your solemn duty faithfully to minister and declare the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and to subordinate all human judgments to that infallible rule.”¹ The members of the court are reminded that as they judge, they judge on behalf of Christ, according to *his* standard—his inspired Word.

In Leviticus 8:12 we read that after Aaron and his sons put on their special robes, Moses “poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron’s head and anointed him, to consecrate him.” The words for *anointing* and *anointed* are forms of the verb מָשַׁח (*māshah*), from which comes מָשִׁיחַ (*māshiah*), Messiah. The Lord Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed of God. The word for *consecrate* (קָדַשׁ *qādash*) means *to make holy, to set apart*. The point is this: after Aaron and his sons were anointed and set apart for the priesthood, they were set apart from ordinary Israelites. They were also set apart from the other Levites. Per God’s command it fell to Aaron, his sons, and their successors, to offer sacrifices, especially the burnt offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering.

So far we have considered the ordination of the priests. Now, moving to our chapter, Numbers 8, let’s consider the cleansing and dedication of the Levites. Our text prescribes: “Take the Levites from among the children of Israel and cleanse them *ceremonially*” (v. 5). Note well: It was not because of the personal goodness or worthiness of the Levites themselves that they were chosen for the special work of the tabernacle. Like all of us, the Levites were sinners. They needed cleansing. The NKJV inserts the word *ceremonially* because it was an outward cleansing. It is impossible for a religious ceremony to actually cleanse the heart. That is something that only God can do. The priest (under the O.T.) or pastor (under the N.T.) cannot cleanse the heart. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse or thoroughly wash away a person’s sins. John makes this crystal-clear in his first epistle: “the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).²

The levitical ceremony included “water of purification,” but it also necessitated the worshiper’s shaving his whole body—head, face, arms, legs, genitals—and washing all his clothes. (While the priests wore special, typical garments while performing their duties, the Levites wore their everyday clothes.)

¹ https://opc.org/BCO/BD.html#Chapter_IV

² The word for “cleanses” is καθαρίζω—a thorough cleansing.

I remember, when I was a little boy, my sister got chewing gum in her hair. She went to bed with chewing gum in her mouth, and it came out in the night, and while sleeping she rolled over on it and got it all matted in her hair. My mom scrubbed and scrubbed, but the gum would not come out. Finally, in desperation, she had to cut my sister's hair. There was no other way she could get her clean. Shaving the whole body—and doing it with a knife made of flint or bronze (surgical steel was not yet unavailable!)—does not sound the least inviting. I'm sure the shaving involved pain. But the shaving does highlight the stubborn stain of sin that has to be removed—an indelible stain that pollutes every one of us too. Take note of this, my dear hearer. If you are going to get to heaven, you need more than the strongest detergent; you need the blood of Christ which alone can remove the stain of sin.

Note that the setting apart of the Levites involved a transfer—a substitution. Verse 10 says, “So you shall bring the Levites before the LORD and the children of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites.” Now obviously two million Israelites did not lay their hands on the Levites. I know from experience that when fifteen or twenty presbyters try to lay their hands on a man being ordained, my arms might not stretch far enough to actually touch the man's head. What the text means is that *some* of the Israelites represented the whole congregation. This indicated the eleven tribes' saying, “We are now relieved of giving our firstborn to serve in the tabernacle; you Levites are taking that responsibility in our place.”

The text continues: “Aaron shall offer the Levites before the LORD, like a wave offering from the children of Israel, that they may perform the work of the LORD.” What is a wave offering? It is an offering that is lifted up by the priest and moved from side to side. In this case it is men who are being offered to the LORD. This waving signified “their readiness to serve God according to their capacity wheresoever they should be”³—wherever God in his providence might use them. All of us should have that attitude: *Lord, I'm yours, use me wherever or however you see fit—you are sovereign.*

The Levites were offered to the LORD. Also, young bulls were offered as a sin offering on their behalf. Again, there is a transfer: the Levites' guilt was symbolically transferred to the bulls, which died in their place. Here is substitutionary atonement that prefigures Christ, who died in place of elect sinners.

Here, then, is the setting apart of the Levites. When we think of the Levites, we tend to remember their work of serving the high priest, Aaron, and his sons. They were the priests' assistants. One commentator explains it this way: The priesthood was divided into three groups: (1) the high priest, (2) ordinary priests, and (3) Levites. All three descended from Levi. All priests were Levites, but not all Levites

³ Matthew Poole commentary on Num. 8:11 (Logos Bible Software)

were priests. The Levites cared for the service of the sanctuary. They took the place of Israel's firstborn who belonged by right to God. The sons of Aaron, who were set apart for the special office of priest, were above the Levites. Only they could minister at the sacrifices of the altar. The highest level of the priesthood was the high priest. He bore the names of all the tribes of Israel on his breastplate in the sanctuary, thus representing all the people before God. Only the high priest could enter the most holy place, and only on one day a year to make atonement for the sins of the entire nation.⁴

So the Levites assisted the priests in the work of the tabernacle. Each family of the Levites had their specific duties. The Kohathites were to carry all the vessels of the sanctuary, including the ark itself. The Gershonites had to carry the tent-hangings and curtains. The heavier burden of the boards, bars and pillars of the tabernacle fell on the sons of Merari.⁵ We know as well that Levites also served as doorkeepers, admitting those who had legitimate business at the tabernacle, while barring access to those who had no right to be there.

But there's another duty of the Levites that we sometimes forget. In Moses's final blessing of Israel before his death he said of the Levites, "They shall *teach* Jacob thy judgments, and Israel thy law: they shall put incense before thee, and whole burnt sacrifice upon thine altar" (Deut. 33:10). Notice: the Levites were not only bearers of burdens helping the priests lift up sacrifices onto God's altar, but they also were to *teach* the people God's judgments and laws. The Levites were to be *teachers*, that is, they were to read and study the sacred text of Scripture and explain and apply it to the people. Is this not what ministers of the Word do in the New Testament age?

In 2 Chronicles 17:8–9 we learn that Jehoshaphat sent the Levites, together with the priests, "and they *taught* in Judah, and had the book of the law of the LORD with them, and went about throughout all the cities of Judah, and *taught* the people." Later we read that "Hezekiah gave encouragement to all the Levites who *taught* the good knowledge of the LORD."⁶

The point is this: the Levites not only did grunt work in the tabernacle. (It was primarily those from age 30–50 who did that.) But the older Levites especially had a significant ministry as *teachers of the Word*. By God's design the Levites had no possession or inheritance in the land, but were scattered among the tribes of Israel, teaching the Word, and judging controversies among the people. This is remarkably similar to the work of ministers of the Word in our own day. There is ordination to the teaching office. A man is ordained or set apart to the teaching office.

⁴ <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Priests-Levites>

⁵ <https://kingjamesbibledictionary.com/Dictionary/levites>

⁶ 2 Chron. 30:22

Young men in our congregation ought to consider serving the Lord in full-time service and preparing for ordination. Paul mentored young Timothy, his son in the faith. Imagine the privilege of training for the ministry under the apostle Paul! But Paul didn't ordain all the ministers himself. He tells Timothy: "Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:1–2). Yes, part of Timothy's calling as a pastor was to train faithful men for the ministry. It's important to realize this, as in our day much of the work of training men for the ministry has been outsourced to the seminaries. I count it as a privilege to have personally mentored Wesley, having spent many hours with him weekly to teach him Hebrew and Greek, and to guide him in his further training for the ministry. This I did with the session's encouragement.

At this present time there is an acute need for ministers. It was not always so. Forty years ago there were more men seeking pastorates than there were churches seeking pastors. Now, the demographics have changed. Last month's general assembly called the churches of the OPC to a season of prayer and fasting during the week beginning September 13, 2026, asking the Lord of the harvest to raise up and equip men for gospel ministry, both at home and abroad. Our session will have more to say about a day of prayer after our August meeting.

The moderator of this year's General Assembly, Pastor Everett Henes, is also the moderator of our presbytery. Recently he wrote an insightful article, "Where Are the Young Men? Ministry and the Crisis of Formation."⁷ He observed that "A shepherd must feed, guard, lead, watch, endure, and stay. He must be gentle with the weak and firm with the wolves. He must have enough tenderness to bind up the wounded and enough courage to confront danger. He must know how to speak and how to be silent, how to comfort and how to rebuke, how to stand before men and how to kneel before God. If that is not considered masculine, then we have forgotten what masculinity is. . . . The wider culture . . . has forgotten what masculinity is. Or, perhaps more accurately, it has offered young men several false versions of it. Some are told that masculinity is inherently suspicious and dangerous, something to be apologized for, softened, or managed. Others are told that masculinity is mainly aggression, self-assertion, physical dominance, online combat, sexual conquest, or contempt for weakness. Neither of these forms young men for the ministry, let alone forms them for marriage, fatherhood, churchmanship, or ordinary adult life. And this is where the ministry shortage begins to look like one symptom of a much broader crisis. Young men are not doing well in our culture. They are falling behind educationally. They are

⁷ <https://heidelblog.net/2026/06/where-are-the-young-men-ministry-and-the-crisis-of-formation/> accessed 6-22-26

struggling economically. Many are delaying marriage or avoiding it altogether. Many are lonely, even if they do not always know how to say so. Many lack close male friendships. Many lack older men who know them, correct them, encourage them, and call them upward. Many are living in a digital world . . .” We who love the Lord ought to encourage our young men to become leaders and consider Christ’s service. The church needs competent and godly teachers. Jesus said, “The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2).

Significantly, there is no office of independent teacher in the Bible—a person who feels he is competent to teach but is not connected in to the church of Jesus Christ in any way. A man may be convinced that he has a better understanding of the Bible than the church does. (I know some of these!) He may indeed have good insights, and may be able to teach compellingly, but he lacks an attitude of submission to the brethren. “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (Eph. 5:21). If we do not submit to one another, then we are in disobedience to Christ. A man should teach both by words and by life. His life should reflect godly, obedient living.

Just as the Levites in ancient Israel were to be set apart for the Lord’s work by ordination, so in the church today the ordinary officers—ministers of the Word, ruling elders and deacons—are to be set apart for the Lord’s work by ordination.

All of us are to do the Lord’s work: “*Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing.*”⁸ *All* of us are to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable *service*.⁹ In Deuteronomy 28, the LORD devotes 53 verses to detailing all the curses which will come upon his people if they do not hearken to his voice and keep his commandments; because they did not *serve* the LORD with joyfulness, therefore they would *serve* enemies which the LORD in wrath would send against them.¹⁰

All God’s people are to serve him—not just the priests and Levites (in Old Testament times), or the ministers of the Word, ruling elders and deacons (in New Testament times). God wants us *all* to serve him. Some serve in a formal, official, public capacity; others in informal, unofficial, private capacities. Not all do the special work of leading public worship, preaching the word, teaching and instructing God’s people, and judging disputes as part of local, regional and national courts (sessions, presbyteries, general assemblies; consistories, classes and synods). Yet fathers are to lead their own families in family worship; parents are to train up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord; all are to be

⁸ Ps. 100:2

⁹ Rom. 12:1

¹⁰ Deut. 28:47–48

peacemakers; all are to bear witness to the truth. Some do it in an official capacity, others do it as private Christians. But the point is: *all* of us are to serve the Lord.

Being a servant is not demeaning or degrading; rather, it is ennobling! The Lord Jesus “took upon him the form of a servant,”¹¹ he “did not come to *be* served, but to *serve*, and to give His life a ransom for many.”¹²

There’s a grand hymn, “Ye *servants* of God, your Master proclaim, and publish abroad his wonderful name.”¹³ There is no greater privilege in all the world than to be a servant of Almighty God! And it’s not something temporary, either. In heaven itself, in the eternal state, “there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his *servants* shall *serve* him” (Rev. 22:3). The only class of people in heaven is servants; those who choose *not* to serve him, serve themselves instead.

Let us all intentionally and voluntarily submit ourselves to God to his service. As Paul writes to the Colossians, “And *whatever you do* in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. . . . *whatever you do*, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you *serve* the Lord Christ.”¹⁴ Amen.

¹¹ Phil. 2:7

¹² Matt. 20:28

¹³ <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/ye-servants-of-god-your-master-proclaim/>

¹⁴ Col. 3:17, 23–24