

## Session 3

### Man as Initiated and Purified – Abraham

“This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.” Genesis 17:10

“Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about...’ Do not lay a hand on the boy,’ he said. ‘Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.’” Genesis 22:2, 12

“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son... Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.” Hebrews 11:7-19

#### I. Masculinity and Initiation.

- A. Initiation of the boys of a culture into manhood is almost universal. In East African society, for example, among the Masai, the initiation occurs with the killing of the lion with a spear to indicate bravery and accomplishment as a hunter. Basic training in the military has often served as the initiation of males into adulthood in Western societies. These initiation ceremonies involve separation from childhood, transition into and education about manhood.
- B. In virtually all societies, learning to be masculine also means being initiated into the religion of the society. For example, the Hebrews initiated the males at birth through circumcision. In adolescence, the boy is called to maturity in the faith on his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday at the Bar Mitzvah. Following several weeks of study. He puts on the phylacteries for his prayers and on the Sabbath he is called to the Torah like a “real man.” The high point is his declamation of the Torah, after which the adults discuss his declamation. From this point he begins to emphasize more adult activities and any childish behavior is frowned upon.
- C. The initiation may be focused at one point in time or it may be spread over much time with many tests involved.

#### II. Initiation in our own culture.

- A. We have virtually lost the ceremony of initiation in our culture and the point at which transition from boyhood to manhood (or girlhood to womanhood for that matter) occurs is broad and blurred.

- B. We have probably shortened boyhood (we expect some adult behaviors from our children at much earlier ages than previously, such as dedication to a sports activity).
- C. We have postponed manhood with later marriages, longer periods of education and less clear distinctions as to when one “really goes to work.”
- D. We have no clear ceremonies of transition from boyhood to manhood (high school graduation is usually followed by some type of additional schooling, early marriages often don’t last).
- E. Males have therefore developed some unhealthy ways of establishing their manhood, e.g. getting drunk on alcohol, engaging in sex, getting a girl pregnant, or committing a crime under peer pressure.
- F. In summary, we don’t initiate males into manhood well today. It is very difficult for a boy to know when he is or should be a man.

### III. Initiation in the church.

- A. Baptism is our initiation into the church. Of course, baptism is far more than just as initiation. We are baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38) and through baptism we identify with Jesus Christ (Romans 6:1-10).
- B. Unfortunately, we have looked at baptism in a somewhat narrow way, e.g.:
  1. Baptism as the single, critical act of obedience which saves us (separates the saved from the lost).
  2. Baptism as a rite of passage (it’s what an adolescent does in a Christian home).
  3. Baptism as a celebratory act signifying a job well done, the sign of future relaxed health and happiness (like a retirement party).
- C. If we read further in Romans (6:11-23), however, we realize that baptism is the beginning of our initiation. We face struggle ahead once we rise from the waters of baptism. We must battle sin since we have been set free from sin. Paul calls us to a struggle with sin through the holy life. “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.” (Romans 6:22)
- D. We must not, however, view our initiation into the faith as a test of God’s grace (remember, His grace is sufficient for all of us). Once we confess our sins and commit our selves to the waters of baptism, we are “on the team.”
- E. Paul, following his baptism by Ananias and as part of his initiation into the faith, went to Arabia for around three years in preparation for his ministry. (Galatians 1;15-18) Many commentators suggest that the Arabian experience greatly shaped his theology and his subsequent ministry.
- F. We should perhaps view baptism as our selection to the team (or induction into the army) of faith and the beginning of training camp (or boot camp) in our war with sin and the Evil One. There will be tests ahead.

### IV. Initiation and men in the church.

- A. I believe that men have much more difficulty determining what they should do after baptism than women. It is not as clear to men how their lives are to change, what challenge lies ahead.
  - 1. Men are searching for training and testing. They expect a struggle. For example, men who are selected to a sports team expect days of hard practice and tough games (but they are on the team). Final victory only comes at the end of the game.
  - 2. Paul said near the end of his life, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” II Timothy 4:7.
  - 3. There is clear need for training and much to struggle against but we frequently fail to make this training and struggle clear.
- B. Of course, many men will resist any struggle (couch potatoes in work, sport and faith) but these same men admire others who struggle (the man who works 15 hours a day, the athlete who works out for hours a day, the new Christian who goes to a difficult mission field).
- C. In sports and in work, men expect periods that prepare them for action.
- D. We perhaps do not emphasize initiation and provide far too few examples of training in our faith.

#### V. Abraham.

- A. Abraham was called on more than one occasion (Genesis 12:1-4; 13:18-20; 15:1-6; 17:1-27). Yet it is in Chapter 17 of Genesis that he is truly initiated as the one to begin a new nation.
  - 1. God states that he wishes to confirm his covenant (v.2).
  - 2. God changes his name. (v.5)
  - 3. God reveals that His covenant will be bound with circumcision. (v. 10, 11)
  - 4. God reaffirms his promise of a son and of a new nation. (v. 16)
  - 5. Abraham and his son Ishmael are circumcised. (v. 26)
- B. After the initiation (perhaps as part of the initiation), Abraham underwent further trials which trained him in the faith.
  - 1. He witnessed the wrath of God poured out on Sodom and Gomorrah, realizing that his petition would not save the cities. (19:1-29)
  - 2. He fails a test of faith with Abimelech. (20:1-17)
  - 3. He must send away his first born son. (21:8-14)
  - 4. He is tested on Moriah when asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. (22:1-19)
- C. Abraham had to be initiated into “the faith” for he was the father of faith, the founder of Israel about whom Paul said “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” (Romans 4:3; Genesis 15:6)
- D. Abraham was put through “basic training” in faith following his initiation into the faith until his faith was mature (when he trusted God to the point of sacrificing Isaac). Only when he could say to Isaac, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” (Genesis 22:8), had he achieved a maturity of faith.
- E. God signals that the initiation is complete once Abraham submits himself to faith. “Do not lay a hand on the boy...Do not do anything to him. Now I

know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” (22:12)

- F. God confirms his promise following Abraham’s act of faith. “because you have done this and have not withheld your son, you only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. (22:16, 17)
- G. Note that, at no time during this initiation period for Abraham, was his relationship with God in jeopardy. Rather, the initiation period was preparing Abraham for his work. God never gave up on Abraham.

#### VI. Should we consider an initiation into the faith?

- A. God directly initiated Abraham into the faith. Yet through most of the scriptures, older men initiate younger men in to the faith. For example, Elijah initiates Elisha (I Kings 19:19 – 21) and Paul initiates Timothy (II Timothy 1:2)
- B. Most of the great Biblical characters, both in the Old and the New Testament, go through periods of trial once they are called and commit themselves to the Lord. E.g. Isaiah and Peter were tested after they were called, and even Jesus was tested in the desert after His baptism.
- C. Historically, the church has encouraged new Christians to undergo a period of training in the faith (such as confirmation classes). This period of training spans the actual initiation into the faith.
- D. Churches from the Restoration tradition have emphasized the steps to be taken until were are initiated (baptized), such as hearing, believing, repenting and confessing. We have euphemistically added “and live a Christian life”. We certainly have made efforts to train persons but perhaps we have not been so clear as to what this training involves. Perhaps we should consider a more serious initiation. Perhaps this is especially important to men initiated into the faith.

#### VI. Suggestions for initiating young men into the faith.

- A. Pair a young man with a man mature in the faith and encourage regular (weekly) meetings during which these men pray together and discuss the challenges of the Christian life. This pairing should be an expectation, but not a rule. (We have been afraid of the abuses associated with “discipling” and we certainly don’t want to coerce persons. Nevertheless, we have been so concerned about the appearance of control that we have basically turned new Christians loose with little instruction.)
- B. Suggest a course of training in scripture (perhaps a self study). This course may be tailored to the individual. Regular reading and study of scripture with the use of study aids could be expected as a usual activity for young Christians. (Young doctors, lawyers and computer scientists are expected to read and study extensively early in their careers – of course they should read and study throughout their careers.) Some have suggested that, since Jesus

went into the wilderness to pray for 40 days after His baptism, we should devote 40 days to prayer, study and meditation following baptism before we throw ourselves completely into work for the church.

- C. Consider some usual exercises that all men in the church undergo as they mature in the faith. For example, perhaps it should be expected that all men participate in a mission trip (does not have to be foreign). A week could be devoted to some Christian service.
- D. Plan “work days” with clear activities for men and develop a milieu in which the young men of the congregation are expected to participate in these work days (to work side by side with an older, experienced Christian).

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