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## **A Kingdom of Priests, a Holy Nation**

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“A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation!” Inspired by these words from Exodus 19:6, we have been praying for the nations that we are serving. Recently however, some have raised question about using this phrase as a basis for our prayer topics. One of the reasons for the question was that this phrase can be misleading. First, critics argue that it is not biblically sound to apply the words from Exodus directly to us today since they are given to Israel as a chosen people of God. Second, they maintain that this prayer topic can lead to unhealthy nationalism and triumphalism in the context of North America. In face of this criticism we have to examine the biblical understanding of the UBF banner.

First of all, the words from Exodus 19:6 must be viewed in light of the witnesses of the entire Bible including the Old and New Testament. In his redemptive history, God created a people for him out of his sovereign grace. Remembering his promise made to Abraham, God delivered Israel out of the house of slavery. In Exodus, Israel as a nation had been placed in a special relationship with God through the covenant: Israel became a covenant people for God. For a former slave people, it was only by grace to be chosen as his treasured possession among all peoples. As a chosen people Israel was called to live as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In this calling of Israel, God’s plan and vision for the whole world is implicitly revealed as expressed in the promise given to Abraham (Gen 12:2). How can we apply this calling of Israel of the Old Testament today?

Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 2:9 applies the calling and identity of God’s people in Exodus 19:6 to the believers in Jesus Christ. This means that through Jesus the Messiah the New Testament believers have been created to fulfill God’s purpose revealed in the Old Testament. Peter calls them “a royal priesthood” (or a kingdom of priests) and “a holy nation.” The emphasis, however, is not on the identity and mission of Christians as individuals but as a corporate body. Therefore, it is the church as a whole that is here being addressed. The privileges and all the promises given to Israel in Exodus 19:6 apply to the church of Christ that consists of the Jews and the Gentiles. Individual Christians, united in Christ, are members of the one body, and due to their being members of the one body of Christ, they are a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

The church as a corporate body is “a royal priesthood” (or a kingdom of priests). The church is royal because God dwells in its midst (cf. 1Pe 2:5) and because it serves God the King. Now the church as a priesthood enjoys a unique closeness to God. And the believers as a kingdom of priests are to mediate God’s blessings through Christ to all the nations as they proclaim the gospel (1Pe 2:9; Mt 28:19-20). They exercise a priestly function as members of the body of Christ.

The church is a holy nation. “Holy” characterizes the church’s unique relationship with God. It has been set apart for God (cf. 1Pe 1:15) by the blood of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Spirit (1Pe 1:2). At the same time, the church is set apart for God’s service. The church is the nation dedicated to “declare the praises of him who called you [them] out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1Pe 2:9).

Based on this understanding of the words from Exodus 19:6 as interpreted through the NT passage from 1 Peter 2:9, we can conclude that the church of Christ is “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Christians as a corporate body have privileges from God and responsibilities to him. Therefore, in one sense, it is not appropriate to call a particular country in the New Testament age “a kingdom of priests and

a holy nation,” that is, in the sense of the old Israel. When we pray for a nation to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” it may express a prayer for a nation determined by its geographical location. By praying so, however, we don’t conceive any theocratic ideas about that nation in terms of Israel as a chosen people in the Old Testament. Instead, in such a prayer, as a church we share in God’s heart and hope for a nation, obeying the Great Commission of our Lord to make disciples of all nations. Keeping 1Peter 2:9 in mind, what we actually mean by praying for a country to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation is this: God may raise many Christians in the country who would spiritually represent the country as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

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