

The Priesthood of All Believers

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The concept of the priesthood of all believers is a basic principle of the people called Baptists. It informs Baptist interpretation of such crucial issues as salvation, soul competency and common responsibility. As Baptists understand it, the priesthood of all believers involves two powerful ideals. First, it means that all persons have direct communion with God through faith in Jesus Christ without the need for any other human mediator. Second, it means that all Christians are called to be priests, ministering one to another and sharing God's love in a sinful world.

The Bible and the Believers

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is evident throughout the Holy Scriptures. The covenant which God began with Israel included a promise that the people of God would be "a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). While early Jewish religion did include priestly class, the whole nation possessed a certain priestly calling. Through the life and witness of the children of Abraham all nations of the world would be blessed (Genesis 28:13-14); Hebrews 11:8-12). As the prophets tell it, the children of Israel were not simply chosen as God's love and care for the whole world.

The New Testament writers extended this promise to that community which they viewed as the new Israel, the church of Jesus Christ. The early Christians proclaimed that Christ was the great high priest, the

mediator between God and human beings. Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection salvation was secured for all those who believed. The writer of Hebrews declared, "For it is fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens" (Hebrews 7:26 RSV). In every salvation is offered to all who come to Christ by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:5-10).

Those who follow Christ, thus belong to a new people, the church. They are, as Scripture says, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people . . ." (I Peter 2:9). As disciples of Christ and members of His body all Christians are priests, called to sacrifice themselves in God's service. In Israel the priests offered sacrifices on behalf of the people. In the new community of the church, Christians present themselves as living sacrifices, carrying out the work of God in sincere worship and loving service (Romans 12:1-2).

As priests, Christians may "come boldly before the throne of grace . . . to obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Through prayer and worship, witness and service, the people of God fulfill their priestly calling. The church, therefore, is a community of priests who demonstrate the life and spirit of Christ (I Peter 2:5, Phil. 2:30, 4:18).

The Reformation and the Priesthood of All Believers

From a historical perspective, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers did not begin among the Baptists. Indeed, Baptists are only one of many Christian groups which emphasize the doctrine. The priesthood of all believers was an important emphasis of the Protestant Reformation which swept across Europe during the sixteenth century. It was a powerful response to the teachings of medieval Roman Catholic Church which drew a sharp distinction between clergy and laity in the church. In medieval catholicism, the priesthood was limited only to the clergy who had a special authority in

4 Priesthood of All Believers

the church. By virtue of proper ordination passed on through the bishops, priests received apostolic authority to govern the church and administer God's grace to the people through the sacraments. In this view, the grace of God was thus mediated to sinful women and men exclusively through those persons who officially controlled the priestly office. The clergy, therefore, stood between God and humanity and were the necessary agents of salvation. They dominated the church and controlled the means for experiencing God's grace. While many of the medieval clergy were sincere in their pastoral efforts, others used their clerical authority to secure economic, ecclesiastical or political power. The abuse of the clergy's power was a major problem in the middle ages.

The great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther (1483-1546), challenged Catholic teaching on the priesthood of the clergy and the corruption of the church. He proclaimed the priesthood of all Christian believers. Luther did not seek to abolish the office of minister, neither did he deny that the clergy fulfilled an important role in teaching and preaching and caring for souls. As Luther saw it, the clergy were God's servants offering pastoral ministry and proclaiming the Word of God. Yet he also insisted that salvation did not depend on the authority of the clergy. Sinners could experience God's grace directly through faith in God's only mediator, Jesus Christ. All sinners could cast themselves on Christ without the mediation of any priest, bishop or minister. By faith alone, all who believed could receive God's forgiveness and reconciliation. Sola fide, faith alone, became the watchword of the Reformation. Luther wrote that "we are also priests forever, which is far more excellent than being kings, for as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things . . . Thus Christ has made it possible for us, provided we believe in him, to be not only his brethren, co-heirs, and fellow-kings, but also his fellow priests."¹ Luther distinguished between the common

calling shared by Christians and specific call to the office of the minister. All Christians received the same priestly calling but they could express that calling through many vocations. Some were called to be clergy, others to be laity. All were called to serve God, whatever their specific work. No single vocation was more Christian than any other, all were necessary to the body of Christ. The Christian cobbler, teacher, tailor or homemaker held a calling equivalent to that of any ordained person.

This Reformation principle had profound influence on Baptist ideals. It means that, in a sense, all Christians belong to the priesthood. All Christians are priests in their freedom to come directly to God through no other mediator than Jesus Christ. They are also priests to each other, called of God to carry out a priestly ministry in the church and amid the brokenness of the world.

Baptists and the Priesthood of All Believers

The Reformation view of the priesthood of all believers shaped Baptist doctrine and practice from the moment the first Baptist congregation was founded in Amsterdam in 1608. The doctrine is evident in numerous Baptist beliefs and actions.

Christ, the High Priest

First, Baptists agree with Martin Luther that Christ is the great high priest through whom Christians have direct access to God. John Smyth, the founder of that first Baptist church, wrote in his "Short Confession of Faith," 1610, that Christ is the "only King, Priest, and Prophet of the church, (to whom) all power both in heaven and earth is given."² Many of the early Baptist confessions of faith contain statements on the high priestly office of Christ. For Baptists, the priesthood of all believers is built upon the centrality of Jesus Christ alone.

Salvation by Faith

6 Priesthood of All Believers

Second, the priesthood of all believers shapes the way in which Baptists understand salvation by faith. In rejecting infant baptism in favor of the baptism of adult believers, the early Baptists asserted that all persons are free to decide for themselves in matters of faith. They are also responsible to God for the decisions they make. Seventeenth century General Baptists stressed the role of free will and human participation in the process of salvation. Their contemporaries, the Particular Baptists, placed greater emphasis on the activity of God in redeeming those sinners elected (chosen) for salvation before the foundation of the world. For these Calvinists, free will was activated only after God's offered grace to sinners. Both groups agreed that neither state nor church, clergy nor government, could force persons to believe in God.

Soul Competency

Third, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is closely related to a doctrine known as soul competency. This means that Baptists are willing to trust the competency of the individual in matters of religion. Each individual is competent to relate directly to God for salvation. Each individual is competent to interpret Scripture according to the dictates of conscience and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Each individual is free under God to live out the Christian faith without coercion or interference from the state. E.Y. Mullins, (1860-1928) one of Southern Baptists' most insightful theologians, wrote that, "The priesthood of all believers . . . is but the expression of the soul's competency on the Godward . . . No human priest may claim to be mediator between the soul and God because no possible reason can be assigned for any competency on his part not common to all believers."³ The twin doctrines of soul competency and the priesthood of all believers convinced Baptists that the people of God could be trusted. Each local congregation of believers could, under God, carry out the gospel in

accordance with the Scripture and the dictates of conscience. This emphasis on radical freedom is one of the most exciting and frightening doctrines of the Baptists. It places Baptists on the side of radical freedom and responsibility.

For soul competency also involves soul responsibility. If individuals can be trusted in matters of religion, they must also accept responsibility for their decisions before God within the community of faith, the church. The affirmation that all believers are priests does not mean that all are free to believe anything they choose or live anyway they wish. Radical freedom demands radical responsibility. Those who claim direct access to God must also live with the possibility of wrong choices and actions which are outside the will of God. Their freedom is not an excuse for arrogance or close-mindedness. They are ever seeking guidance through scripture, prayer, and the witness of the Christian community. Priestly believers are also called to be humble believers as they seek to do God's will.

The doctrines of the priesthood of believers and soul competency inform the dissenting tradition of the Baptists. Individually and collectively, Baptists often "go it alone" in response to the dictates of conscience. Because of their commitment to radical freedom they are often uncomfortable with religious or governmental establishments which may require conformity or impose coercion. That dissenting tradition was evident in those colonial Baptists who went to jail rather than secure a preaching license from the state. It is evident in the Black Baptist churches which lifted voices of freedom against the terrible restraints of racism and segregation.

Priests to One Another

Fourth, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers means that all God's people are priests, ministering to others in the name of Christ. While early Baptists set aside (ordained) specific persons to carry out

8 *Priesthood of All Believers*

special ministerial functions in the church, they also understood that all Christians were called to the ministry of witness and concern. Conversion to Christ, not ordination, was thought which made all persons ministers. The earliest Baptist witness came from "tailors, leather sellers, soap boilers, brewers, weavers, and tinkers." As one scholar observes, "it was vastly to the credit of these primitive (early) Baptists that they re-discovered how to bring the gifts of laymen and unschooled members into play for spiritual ends."⁴ The church as Baptists understood it was a community of ministers.

Early Baptists portrayed the priesthood of believers through two important symbols, baptism, and the laying on of hands. Baptism was the great equalizer for all human beings who "put on Christ." It was that common evangelical event offered to all who believed. Baptism linked all persons to Jesus Christ and his church. As Baptists saw it, every individual who is united to Christ is baptized into the priesthood. Many Baptist groups further symbolized the priestly calling of all believers by administering the laying on of hands to the newly baptized. Citing Hebrews 6:1-2, they viewed the laying on of hands as a symbol of the coming of the Holy Spirit into the life of the new Christian. It was also a public demonstration that all Christians were called to minister for Christ. In that sense, everyone who was in Christ was ordained with the laying on of hands. They also used the laying on of hands to set aside specific persons for specific pastoral ministries within the church. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most General Baptist congregations and some Particular Baptist churches observed these practices.

During the nineteenth century, Baptist churches on the American frontier were often led by "farmer-preachers," sometimes formally ordained, sometimes not, who worked in the community during the week and on

Sunday exercised pastoral gifts within the local congregation.

Frontier church services conveyed the common priestly calling of all believers. Prayer meetings allowed all Christians to intercede with God on behalf of others. Testimony meetings offered occasions in which any person who felt the Spirit's lead might declare the word and works of God for all to hear. The right hand of fellowship was extended by the church to all who sought membership. The washing of feet, practiced to this day among many Baptist groups, symbolized servanthood and Christian love. All members washed the feet of others. Thus many facets of the Baptist theology of the laity are grounded in the priesthood and the trustworthiness of the individual Christian.

Priests Together

Fifth, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is not simply an individual matter. To be a priest of Christ requires membership in that community of priests, the church. The nurturing community of the church is often a valuable corrective to the dangers of religious extremism and excessive individualism among the Baptists. To be a priest involves ministry on behalf of others'. Thus Baptists are called to be "priests to each other." As people of God all we share a common calling to "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

In common spiritual experience, priestly calling and communal responsibility, nineteenth century Baptists cultivated something of a "people's church," which emphasized that the call to ministry was given to all Christians. The final authority for church government was mediated to the individual from Christ through the congregation. Nineteenth century church manuals (handbooks on order and practice) indicate that Baptists placed the government of the church in the hands of the people, in accordance with what they believed to be the

10 *Priesthood of All Believers*

will of God. All members of a Baptist church stood equal before God and one another. No hierarchy of church government could create an elite group who were alone any other in power or prestige.

This is not to suggest that Baptists refused to distinguish between the roles of the clergy and laity. From the seventeenth century onward, Baptists recognized that some individuals were called to carry out certain ministerial functions within the church. These offices were authorized by the congregation with a particular authority to exercise leadership and declare the Word. At their best, Baptists sought to maintain a healthy tension between the universal priesthood of all believers and the peculiar calling of ordained ministers to represent ministry and leadership in the congregation.

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers requires the continuing struggle for a healthy tension between freedom and responsibility. It is not an occasion for arrogance but a call to humility. Christians are not power-brokers but servants, one to another. Like the salvation which comes from Christ, the priesthood of believers is "not of your own doing, it is the gift of God -- not of works, lest any . . . should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Endnotes

¹ Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in Three Treatises (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), p.290.

² John Smyth, "Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles," in William L. Lumpkin, Baptist Confessions of Faith (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), p.108.

³ E.Y. Mullins, The Axioms of Religion (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1908),p.56.

⁴ Rufus Jones, Studies in Mystical Religion (London: McMillan, 1909),p.418.

Leonard based the format of this article on the pamphlet "The Priesthood of All Believers" which he wrote for the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. It was published in 1989.