

~Script: Pastor Frank Johnson~

## The Priestly Role of the Church in Society

### 1 Peter 2:9-12

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Take a first look.

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I. Welcome to the priesthood, my friends! In Baptist-Christian life, we don't talk that much about priests. We think of folks called *priests* as much too *Catholic*. We're not into the whole realm of special robes or collared shirts that those called *priests* have to wear (although, I suspect that some still expect me to dress up a bit more than most in my role as your pastor, especially on Sunday mornings). In ancient Israel, the spiritual life of the nation was guided and expressed by men called *priests*. These men had a variety of tasks they were prescribed to do, but the essence of their job could be described this way: they stood between God and the people to bring them together. The Church (both with a capital "C" and in every local expression) is called to do something of the same today. The Church is sent by God to stand between God and the rest of the people-groups of the world for the purpose of bringing them into fellowship with God. Now doesn't this sound a whole lot like the role of the priests of ancient Israel? What we Baptist-Christians must understand about the priesthood is really quite startling. *We are all priests in this New Testament sense*. We are members of the Church, the Body of Christ, which as a living fellowship of Jesus' followers, truly does stand between God and the world. We are called, both individually and collectively, to represent Him to the world. If we are to fulfill this calling, there are at least three things we must know. This knowledge then becomes our mode of influencing our culture. We begin with Peter's words of encouragement.

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Take a closer look at 1 Peter 2:9-12.

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#### **I. TO FULFILL HER PRIESTLY ROLE IN SOCIETY, THE CHURCH MUST UNDERSTAND HER CHARACTER. 1 Peter 2:9a, 10**

*We will spend an extra bit of time on this foundational idea. Note these descriptive phrases from the text:*

1. *The Church is a chosen people.* Here is the mystery of what Paul calls election. We have been chosen by God to know Him and experience His love. It is clear enough in the passage, too. The contrast of verse 9 is with the closing of verse 8: "They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for." Note the delicate balance between the choice of the people and the choice of God. It was those who chose to disbelieve the message of Christ who were destined to stumble because of their unbelief. In contrast to this, he says, "But *you ...*"—what a powerful contrast! God has *chosen* His people.

A—Does not such a concept give our lives a sense of eternal purpose? Is there not in our souls a deeply felt joy in responding to His offer of grace and to the compelling attraction that brought us to Him?

**I— A Christian mom named Debbie Brumley reports a scene that illustrates this.** She relates, "To emphasize the point of salvation being free and a gift from the Lord, our pastor held up a dollar bill and said, 'You see this dollar bill? It is a gift to whoever will receive it. Now if you really wanted it, you would have to come and accept it.'"

She continues, "If the pastor was still in possession of the dollar bill when he concluded his sermon, he could have made a strong point of how many souls are lost because they hesitate to accept the gift of salvation until it is too late. Any such plan to bring across that point, however, was

foiled when our three-year-old son ran out of his seat to the front of the church and took the dollar from Rev. Massey!

“Rev. Massey capitalized on the situation, however, and made an equally impressive point after the roar of the congregation had settled down. With our little son now back in the pew and proudly holding his newly acquired gift, an obviously pleased pastor changed his object lesson to: ‘If only folks could see the value of God’s great gift, Jesus, they would be running to him also!’”<sup>1</sup>

Now, the Christian understanding of salvation is just this. The ability and the inclination to see that value and run to Jesus is evidence that God is already at work in that heart. It is the choice of God to offer such a great gift and to give us the grace to receive it.

2. *The Church is a royal priesthood.* Notice the combination of this central idea. The Church collectively is a *priesthood*, standing between God and the rest of humanity. But she is a *royal* priesthood. We are a priesthood because we are “in Christ,” Who alone can stand between God and people and bring them together, and we are a royal priesthood because we are children of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

A—How well do we represent our King and Priest in the lives we live before the watching world?

3. *The Church is a holy nation.* Here is the heart of our true citizenship. We are citizens of the kingdom of heaven, which should make us even better citizens of the kingdoms of earth. The people of God, when united under the Lord Jesus Christ, are the true “city set upon a hill.”

4. *The Church is a people belonging to God.* Here is a further definition of what it means to be a “holy nation.” We are set apart (i.e., holy) as God’s very own people.

A—In light of these realities, may the Lord give us the right sense of priority with our dual citizenship, both in the kingdom of God and (in our case today) the United States of America.

**I—As you may remember, Andrew Johnson was the vice-president under Abraham Lincoln.** He assumed the presidency after Lincoln was shot. He pardoned those who had seceded and continued Lincoln’s plan for Reconstruction of the South. He had his sense of priority in place, even as he struggled to lead in the rebuilding of the Union. Listen to what he said on one occasion: “Let us look forward to the time when we can take the flag of our country and nail it below the Cross, and there let it wave as it waved in the olden times, and let us gather around it and inscribe for our motto: ‘Liberty and Union, one and inseparable, now and forever,’ and exclaim, Christ first, our country next!”<sup>2</sup> Can you see in your imagination heads exploding today, if almost any elected official said that?

Andrew Johnson was not advocating some concept of theocracy, the government of people assumedly under God and led by clergy. That is the form of government that is being pushed by Islam all over the world. Rather, this is a simple but profound application of the basic idea of government: all those in human power are under the ultimate authority of the King of kings and the Lord of lords, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of the world. “Christ first, our country next” should be the heart-cry of Christians in every nation. As followers of Jesus, we belong to God. In a very important but secondary sense, we belong to our nation.

5. *The Church has gone from not being a people to being the people of God, who have received His mercy.* Here is the heart of our attitude before God. We stand humbly before both God and the world, because our standing with Him is not based on our merit, nor our good “track record,” but rather on His mercy and grace.

<sup>1</sup> Debbie Brumley, Concord, NC. *Christian Reader*, “Lite Fare.”

<sup>2</sup> *America’s God and Country Encyclopedia of Quotations*, p. 334.

A—The Church is not a people of innate superiority, but a people of grace and undeserved love.

**I—The language of verse 10 is drawn from the story of Hosea. Let me remind you of it.** Hosea was a prophet of God during the declining years of Israel. At his time, the nation was still divided. The northern kingdom was still called Israel, while the southern kingdom took the name of its prominent tribe, Judah. The people of the northern kingdom had turned away from God and had continued worshipping idols. God sent them a message through Hosea's own family. He told Hosea, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord" (Hosea 1:2, NIV). So this is what Hosea did. He married a woman who eventually turned to prostitution and abandoned her family. They had three children, whose names represented God's perspective on the nation.

God told them to name the **firstborn son Jezreel**, which reminded the people of a massacre that had taken place at Jezreel and "the judgment of God" that would surely come because of it. God told them to name **the second child, a daughter, Lo-Ruhamah**, meaning "not loved." God was withdrawing His forgiving love from the northern kingdom because of their evil and was turning it toward Judah. **Their third child was a boy**, whom God told them to name **Lo-Ammi**. Lo-Ammi means "not my people."

Here was the application for God's people under the Old Covenant: the people had turned away from God in a way similar to the adultery of Hosea's wife. Because of this, they were separated from His love; they were not His people *in heart*, even though they claimed to be *in name*.

Here is Peter's application to His Christian readers: when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, we move from those separated from God's love and purposes to those who are fully loved by God [John 3:16 revisited]. We go from being people with only a temporary identity to being *the people of God* with an eternal citizenship in heaven.

A—Have we each found the love and sense of belonging before God that can only come through personal faith in Jesus Christ?

**I—"From 1986 to 1990, Frank Reed was held hostage in a Lebanon cell.** For months at a time Reed was blindfolded, living in complete darkness, or chained to a wall and kept in absolute silence. On one occasion, he was moved to another room, and, although blindfolded, he could sense others in the room. Yet it was three weeks before he dared peek out to discover he was chained next to Terry Anderson and Tom Sutherland.

"Although he was beaten, made ill, and tormented, Reed felt most the lack of anyone caring. He said in an interview with *Time*, 'Nothing I did mattered to anyone. I began to realize how withering it is to exist with not a single expression of caring around [me]. ... I learned one overriding fact: caring is a powerful force. If no one cares, you are truly alone.'"<sup>3</sup>

In Christ, we are shown the care of God in a most dramatic fashion. [Romans 5:8] We who have put our faith in Him have truly gone from "not loved" to this: nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39). This is caring with the power of heaven behind it!

**I—As the renowned pastor Martyn Lloyd-Jones has written, "Our normal, ordinary view of salvation is hopelessly and ridiculously inadequate.** Our trouble is that we always start with ourselves instead of starting with God. Instead of going to the Bible and looking at its revelation and discovering there what salvation means, I start with myself and certain things that I want and desire, certain benefits that I always want to enjoy in this life and in this world.

"I want forgiveness of sins; I want peace of conscience and of mind; I want enjoyment and happiness; I want to be delivered from certain sins; I want guidance; I want this and that; and my whole conception of salvation is reduced to that level. ...

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn H. Pryor, Snyder, Texas. *Leadership*, Vol. 12, no. 1.

“The most wonderful thing of all is not that my sins have been forgiven, nor that I may enjoy certain experiences and blessing as a Christian. The thing that should astound me ... is that I am a child of God, one of God’s people.”<sup>4</sup>

TO FULFILL OUR PRIESTLY ROLE IN SOCIETY, WE AS THE CHURCH MUST KNOW WHO WE ARE BEFORE GOD. But there is more.

## **II. TO FULFILL HER PRIESTLY ROLE IN SOCIETY, THE CHURCH MUST UNDERSTAND HER CALLING. 2 Peter 2:9b, 11-12**

1. *The Church exists to declare the praises of her God to the world.* He is the only One Who can call us “out of darkness into his wonderful light.” He is the only One who deserves ultimate glory, as the Creator of humanity and the One Who establishes and removes nations.

A—Maintaining a fiercely devoted worship of God despite either the apathy or the ignorance of our society is essential.

**I—Whenever we turn aside to worship the Lord, rather than just taking the time off to play, we are declaring the praises of the One Who has given us the heritage of liberty we celebrate on Independence Day.** We are saying loudly before the watching world that Christ does indeed come first in all our plans, all our activities, all our days. This makes us better citizens, because we know from where true freedom comes.

**A few year ago, some proposed that we change our national anthem from “The Star-spangled Banner” to “America the Beautiful.” Not only is it easier to sing, but it also puts patriotism in its proper setting.**

Katharine Bates stood at the top of Pikes Peak in July of 1893 and found the inspiration for “America the Beautiful.” She was a professor of English at the Wellesley College for women near Boston. During that summer of 1893, she accompanied several other professors to teach a three-week summer session at Colorado College in Colorado Springs. In route to Colorado, they traveled by train across the vast expanse of America. Along the way, they stopped in Chicago for the World’s Fair and were amazed by all of the exhibits. Ms. Bates was overwhelmed with emotion by the intellectual exhilaration of the fair, the teaching assignment in Colorado, and the unique beauty of the open plains and the majestic Rocky Mountains.

At the end of their brief teaching tenure, the professors went to the top of Pike’s Peak in a horse-drawn wagon. At the precipice of 14,000 feet, she felt the words rush into her heart. That evening when she returned to her hotel room, she wrote the words to the song. It was two years later that she ran across the words in her notebook from Colorado and submitted her poem to *The Congregational* magazine. They published it in their July 4, 1895, issue. The poem attracted immediate attention and was set to various melodies. It was finally Samuel Ward who years later gave it the current melody that has been sung over and over since.

This pastor’s daughter never received more than a few dollars for her composition. She caught the essence of America’s beauty by defining its natural majesty as a gift of God’s grace.

“America, America, God shed His grace on thee; /And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.” We need to offer that prayer every day in these troubled times.

2. *The Church exists to demonstrate the reality of God in the world.* [cf. Matthew 5:13-16]  
a. *We do this by living a truly and morally good life.* The ultimate witness of a godly Christian life comes at the end, when Jesus returns and the whole truth is revealed. The end of verse 12 sounds familiar doesn’t it? In Matthew 5:16, Jesus is recorded as saying, “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (NIV).

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<sup>4</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in *Safe in the World. Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, no. 7.

b. We do this by resisting ungodly temptation and doing the right thing by the power of God's Spirit.

A—Does the character of our lives demonstrate the presence of the living God?

**I—Even Hillary Clinton recognized the need to resist temptation at one point.** In a speech advocating gun control in response to the shootings in Littleton, Colorado, back in 1999, she said, "Part of growing up is learning how to control one's impulses."<sup>5</sup> I wonder if she glanced at her husband, who was standing nearby, after she said this? Resist temptation, indeed.

Where do we get the power to control our impulses? It comes from God's Spirit working within us. Tom Tripp sent this to *Leadership* journal: "In the book *Healing the Masculine Soul*, Gordon Dalbey says that when Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the *Helper*, he uses a Greek word, *paraclete* [parakletos, παράκλητος], that was an ancient warrior's term. 'Greek soldiers went into battle in pairs,' says Dalbey, 'so when the enemy attacked, they could draw together back-to-back, covering each other's blind side. One's battle partner was the *paraclete*.' Our Lord does not send us to fight the good fight alone. The Holy Spirit is our battle partner who covers our blind side and fights for our well being."<sup>6</sup> That Greek term means literally, "called to one's side." This is what the Holy Spirit is for every believer and for the Church as a whole. He is called to our side, even to our backs, to protect and empower us, to bring about in us what we could never produce on our own.

[Galatians 5:22-23]

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Take it home (Questions for Application)

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I. What do each of these Christian realities mean to us? Let's take some time to think about and talk about each of them.

1. We are *chosen by God*.
2. We are *children of the King* of kings and the great High Priest.
3. We are *a spiritual nation* set apart unto the Lord as holy.
4. *We belong to God, and we are aliens and strangers in the world.*

II. How is our character demonstrating these realities today?

1. Is there anything about our habits or our attitudes that cancels this purpose? We must be honest with ourselves here. What is God calling us to do about this?

2. What aspects of character is God speaking to us about the most right now? What are our growing edges in the faith?

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<sup>5</sup> *World*, May 8, 1999, from *Salt*, Vol 9, No. 2, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Tripp, Colusa, California. *Leadership*, Vol. 15, no. 2.