

The Priesthood of All Believers

1 Peter 2:4-5

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

This evening I want to discuss a fundamental biblical doctrine often referred to as “The Priesthood of all Believers”. It is sometimes called Universal Priesthood or the priesthood of the saints. It is a doctrine that was rediscovered during the Reformation and one of Martin Luther’s hills that he was willing to die on. The reason I want to talk about it this evening is because I have a great conviction that we as Baptists and many other protestants have misunderstood this doctrine and have neglected its proper application to our life as the Body of Christ. I believe we can trace our error through Baptist history and tweak our understanding in a way that radically alters the way we live and minister as the Body of Christ. That is what I pray the Lord will accomplish this evening with our time together.

1. The Biblical Doctrine

1 Peter 2:4-5 is the most precise verse in all of the Bible that teaches the doctrine of the universal priesthood. It reads:

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

There are two key teachings in this text that we need to see. First, Peter makes it clear that as people come to Jesus through faith, they are joined together like living bricks in order to build a spiritual house, which is the true church on earth. I taught a few weeks back that the church is not a building, the truth is it is not a physical building but a spiritual building made out of people. These people make up a replacement for the physical building that Peter’s audience would have known, which is the Temple.

Secondly, Peter says that these people also make up a holy priesthood. Of course, the only priesthood Peter's Jewish audience had ever known was that of Judaism. They would have clearly understood Peter to be saying the priesthood of Judaism is now replaced with the Ekklesia, the Body of Christ. Peter also says that the duties and operations of the priesthood is being given over to this new people. They are the ones now that will offer spiritual sacrifices to God, both for themselves and for anyone else that wants to come to God.

Matthew 21:28 – 43 (Look at 43)

Now let's break the 2 key teachings down as we understand them Scripturally and see how they apply to us.

The **Spiritual House** as it replaces the Temple:

The Temple was a physical location where God chose to let his presence dwell. If anyone wanted to come to God, they had to travel to this location. Once they travelled to this location, they were still limited on how close they could get to him as he dwelt in the holy of holies, where only the high priest could go.

So now, all believers collectively make up the location where God's presence dwells on the earth. Wherever believers are, God is also. The house of God is no longer confined to a geographical location where people have to travel to in order to be with God, but it is mobile and now goes to the ends of the earth. Also, his presence is no longer hidden in the holy of holies but is open to all who come by faith in Jesus Christ.

The **Holy Priesthood** as it replaces the Aaronic Priesthood of the Old Covenant:

The Aaronic priesthood was responsible for communicating between God and man and man and God, orchestrating and conducting worship, ministering to God's people, and making God known to the world. Since Peter says that all who come to Jesus through faith are now a holy priesthood, we are the ones who carry these duties on. We communicate between God and man and man and God. We tell people what God says to them (through His Word) and help them respond to Him (through prayers and supplications). We collectively orchestrate and conduct the worship of God. We are all ministers to God's

people and we are all responsible to make God known to the world. We are all the priesthood of God appointed by the Great High Priest Jesus. However, we need to remember we are a spiritual priesthood. That is why we do not wear certain clothes or carry out certain ceremonies and live in secluded locations.

2. The Baptist Error

Now that we have laid a biblical foundation for understanding this doctrine let's look at how we typically define it as Baptist and see if we need to tweak our understanding and consequently our practices.

Martin Luther, along with many other reformers, recognized that the Roman Catholic doctrine of "temporal and spiritual orders" (most commonly known to us as "Clergy and laity") was not biblically accurate. In fact, for the most part it was man-made. They essentially believed that common believers were not capable of fulfilling the duties that the clergy were called to so they created this great distinction between the two. Instead of an equal playing field where every believer participated in the priestly duties, the Roman Catholic church created a hierarchy in the church. The trained professionals ruled over the common untrained people. This distinction was largely non-existent prior to the fourth century. (I say largely because some historians claim there were traces of it just prior to Constantine). We all know what happened with this unbiblical dispensing of power.

So Luther wanted to return the ministry of the church back to the people. In his *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation* (1520) he says, "For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop, and pope, although of course it is not seemly that just anybody shall exercise such office." It is my opinion that Luther did go far enough with his reform of this error, as was the case with many other areas of the reformation. Luther made great steps toward the Scriptural teaching in this area but steps toward the Scripture is not enough, we must return fully to the Scriptures no matter how much it conflicts with the current culture and state of affairs.

I believe the Baptist erred in their misunderstanding or misinterpretation of Luther's argument against clericalism. Which, is a misinterpretation of 1 Peter 2:4-5. The Baptist interpreted the doctrine as "The Priesthood of the Believer" instead of "Believers". This one letter made a significant difference. The Baptist understood this individualistically. They simply took away that individual believers

did not need a priest to come to God. While that is absolutely true, it is not the intent of the Reformers nor the Bible to be the definition of the doctrine of priesthood of all believers. Winthrop S. Hudson offered this critique:

“To the extent that Baptists were to develop an apologetic for their church life during the early decades of the twentieth century, it was to be on the basis of this highly individualistic principle. It has become increasingly apparent that this principle was derived from the general cultural and religious climate of the nineteenth century rather than from any serious study of the Bible. ... The practical effect of the stress upon “soul competency” as the cardinal doctrine of Baptists was to make every man’s hat his own church.”

Paul Althaus, the great interpreter of Luther’s theology, explains the original Reformation meaning of this term:

“Luther never understands the priesthood of all believers merely in the sense of the Christian’s freedom to stand in a direct relationship to God without a human mediator. Rather, he constantly emphasizes the Christian’s evangelical authority to come before God on behalf of the brethren and also of the world. The universal priesthood expresses not religious individualism but its exact opposite, the reality of the congregation as a community.”

Here are some of the problems this error has created:

- We are not interpreting and applying the Scriptures fully and/or correctly. That always needs to change (*semper reformanda*)
- Our Christianity has suffered greatly at the hands of “individualism”, which this error has energized.
- We have fallen short of fully reforming the clericalism of Roman Catholicism and thus propagated a dangerous class distinction within Christendom (Professionals verses amateurs)
- This error has propagated performance driven and participatory worship
- It has fostered and fueled many negative aspects of denominationalism
- It has weakened the church’s witness to the world through the splintering within our ministry

3. The Proper Application

This may seem like a hopeless situation but I assure you it is not. The answer is that we all return to the Scriptures together to see how God wants it to be and do it. It really is that simple. In this particular situation what God wants is for his people to live a shared life of ministry and worship together. God has not designed the church to be ruled by professionals. He has designed it to be ruled by the Chief Shepherd Jesus Christ. He has ordained it to be guarded and equipped by spiritually gifted individuals (i.e. pastors, evangelists, apostles, prophets, teachers, etc... Eph. 4:11-12), but those individuals are not greater than any others in the Body. That is why they are gifted by the Spirit of God, so they cannot claim to be better than anyone else. They do not deserve the honors of serving their roles anymore than they deserved their salvation.

The point we need to take away is that we are the Body of Christ. Every member is a priest. You were employed the moment you were saved. The only that makes you qualified is that you are in Christ. The only thing that makes you able is that the Spirit of God dwells in you.

- You are the (mobile) dwelling place of God on the earth. Are you welcoming people into your life so they can be in his presence? Are you going where he is not known so that people can meet him?
- You are a communicator between God and man and man and God. Are you doing all you can to deliver God's message to this broken world? Are you pleading on behalf of the lost to God for their salvation? Do people even know you have a direct line to God and speak to him on their behalf?
- You are an orchestrator and conductor of God's worship. Are you contributing to his worship? Are you bringing your gift to worship every time you meet with God's people?
- You are a minister in God's kingdom to God's people. Are you making every effort to minister?
- You are as responsible as any famous preacher to make God known in this world. Are you declaring his holy name as you ought.