

Why is the Priesthood of the Believer so important?

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Under the old covenant of Moses, everything spiritual was locked in types, shadows, and symbols. The ‘tangible things’ were physical: *a king, a holy calendar, a land, an army, a temple, an ethnicity, a distinction by tribes, a geographical holy place, an emphasis upon physical cleanliness* (as ceremonially important), *a priest class, animal blood and flesh as sacrifices, etc.* The OT Levitical system of types and shadows was saturated with the deaths of countless sacrificial animals, but their blood could not take away sin (Heb 10:4ff.). But, now Christ has inaugurated ‘a new and living way through the veil that is, His flesh’. Wonder of wonders, the tearing of Christ’s flesh and the spilling of His blood brings the believing sinner all the way into the presence of God through Christ’s indestructible life (Heb 10:19-22).

Our Savior’s finished work has changed everything. He brought in that wonderful series of ‘better things’ catalogued in the book of Hebrews: *better sacrifice, better promises, better covenant, better high priest, better hope, etc.* One of the great themes of the book of Hebrews is that Christ’s priesthood abolishes all sacrificing priesthoods (even if those that bear the name ‘Christian’—for no mortal sinner has the ability to mediate the grace of God or to represent a fellow sinner before God). That role as Mediator belongs to Christ alone. The soaring cathedrals and massive gilded altar pieces so common in Europe are beautiful and inspiring, but ultimately a distraction from the “new and living way” of access to God in Christ. For, Christ crucified and risen IS our altar; our meeting place with Almighty God (Heb 13:10).

The doctrine of the priesthood of believers was one of the top three ideas of the Protestant Reformation (the other two being sola scriptura, and sola fide). When Luther emphasized the priesthood of the believer, he was seeking to recapture an evangelical ecclesiology, and the biblical concept of a life of holistic worship. The declaration of the priesthood of believers was the great truth which dissolved the gash inherent in the sacred-secular split imposed on the Medieval religious community. For, Medieval Catholicism had deepened the divide between the sacred and the secular—pushing its false dichotomy to the limit. How liberating it must have been when Luther preached that the common man and woman could glorify God in their vocations, in their everyday calling, whether it be baker, chimney sweep, blacksmith, or maid.

The priesthood of all believers is an idea that is vital to the health and effectiveness of the church. But, it is a most neglected doctrine because it is often considered negative, impractical, and even controversial. Today it seems that an emphasis on the priesthood of the believer is not viewed as pragmatic; for it would ‘gum up’ the works of a professional ministry. Nonetheless, the Word of God stands unalterably firm, NT believers are indeed blessed with at least four dimensions to their priesthood: 1) They have direct access to God through Christ (Heb 4:14-16. 2) They are appointed to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God (Heb 13:15-16; 1 Pet 2:5). 3) They are called to fulfill a prophetic, or proclaiming role (Eph 5:18-20; 1 Pet 2:9-10). 4) And, they are gospel agents of reconciliation (Rom 1:14-15; 2 Cor 5:18-21).

When our priesthood through Christ, our Great High Priest, is fully embraced, it is life-transforming. For, it communicates boldness, for this is how our Lord sees us—as His priests—He has designated us thus. And, it is a solid ground to pray more boldly and confidently. For, Christ’s all-sufficient sacrifice means that we are adopted in the Son—Christ having given us His own right-relatedness to the Holy Trinity. Therefore, for believers as those who are in union with Christ, the new covenant name of God is ‘Father’. As our Heavenly Father, God Almighty holds us in His heart of love and delights to address the cares of His people as they approach His throne of grace with their needs, and the needs of their brethren (Heb 2:17-18; 4:14-16). Our Lord promises that as we pray to the Father in His Name, He will answer (Jn 16:23-27).

In the new covenant, believers share incredible commonality—literally being members of one another by reason of shared life in Christ (Eph 4:25; 1 Jn 1:1-7). Christ’s Person and work is our foundation and focus. For, He is our High Priest who is in heaven—ever-living to make intercession for us (Heb 7:24-27). So fully is the NT believer complete in Him, and so effectually does He represent believers that the ‘physical things’ emphasized under the old covenant are no longer needed to ‘image’ or represent an all-sufficient Redeemer and redemption (Col 2:17).

So perfect is the access to God provided by the Son that a fallible mortal priest class is no longer necessary (Eph 2:18). So comprehensive is His one-time sacrifice in its ability to bring believers all the way to God that the sacrifices we offer now are offerings of praise, thanksgiving, worship, and service (Heb 13:15-16). “And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:4-5). The Christian life rests upon Christ’s finished work, therefore it is a life of holistic gratitude; of an enduring, consecrated ‘thank you’.

Thus, the priesthood of the NT believer is central to ‘how we do church’. According to Romans 12:1-2, our reasonable service of worship is the presentation of our entire lives back to God as a living sacrifice. This is to be a constant action and state of mind. For, the believer-priest is not only a worshipping servant, but also a sanctuary, or temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19-20). Author Paul Zahl argues that Europe’s monumental cathedrals are in reality ‘grave stones’, marking the death of the church on the continent. For, when the church is objectified as an institutional value in itself, a moribund case of amnesia sets in—a deadly forgetfulness that the church is birthed and sustained by the gospel, Christ is the High Priest and altar of meeting, and the believer is the sanctuary!

Christ’s church is His ‘body’ on earth. Our relation to our brethren is likened to interrelated members of a body of which Christ is Head (1 Cor 12:12-31). This body is to be committed to mutual edification so that each member is ‘building with Christ’. Each believer has received “the manifestation of the Spirit” (a particular Spirit-granted giftedness) which he or

she is *to steward* by diligently exercising that gift to the edification of the body. This is essential to living out our believer-priest identity.

Under the new covenant, the Holy Spirit actualizes these supernatural relationships we have with the Lord and with one another. (By *actualize* we mean that the Spirit illuminates our understanding of these spiritual realities). But, we must also instruct each other in these truths. Believer-priests must be taught who they are in Christ so that these spiritual realities fill the consciousness and exert a life-directing effect. Our new identity as sons, priests, slaves, and brothers must be imbued upon the saints. Without this kind of mentoring, equipping, and training, professing Christians easily slip into the ecclesiological quicksand of church existing merely as a religious social institution which holds a weekly event.

When it comes to how we are to ‘do church’, relating as a believer-priest is the polar opposite of a consumer and a spectator. The believer-priest is a disciple and a disciple-maker. He is ‘on mission’ in his zeal to fulfill the Great Commission. He counts it a great privilege to build with Christ by edifying the brethren. He is to model what it means to invest in others. The believer-priest is told to “stir up one another” Heb. 10:24; be “devoted to good deeds” (Titus 3:8); “exhort against sin” (Heb. 3:13); “edify one another” (1 Thess. 5:11); “teach” and “admonish” one another (Col. 3:16). In other words, God’s believer-priest, when controlled by the Spirit and saturated with the Word of God is fully equipped, commanded, and enabled to minister to the body. He now lives to bless God and others.

Recently when meeting with a local pastor, the minister was bemoaning the fact that it was nearly impossible to get people to come to church on time. Inevitably, no matter what kind of effort he made to endorse the benefits of punctuality, church members still sauntered into the sanctuary during a 15 to 20-minute window *after* the appointed starting time of the worship service. I kept thinking to myself, “Ecclesiastical engineers can’t have it both ways. One cannot create a climate of comfortableness, coddling, and laidback ease, then expect sacrificial commitment.” This is reminiscent of Paul Washer’s statement about the attraction model of church: “You’ve got to keep the way you got them in the first place.” In other words, if the functional ecclesiology is that one’s commitment level is controlled by one’s comfort level, rather than by one’s calling as a slave of Christ and a recipient of the mercies of God, then of course commitment will be based on what feels comfortable.

How different is the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer! The believer-priest sees himself as Christ’s purchased possession (not his own, but bought with a price). He knows that His Lord and Savior has taken possession of him and that everything he has been given is ‘on loan’—and that he will give an account of how he has used what was entrusted to him. Therefore, punctual church attendance is not an issue for him, for he is not there to warm a pew, or check off an attendance box—he knows that God has surrounded him with relationships which represent divine appointments for mutual edification. He comes to church with the expectation that the Spirit of God has equipped and called him to fulfill his role and part in the corporate sanctification and maturity of the body (Eph 4:11-16; Heb 10:23-25).

Attraction-business models of church tend to downplay our accountability to God—even at times regarding our obligation to God and what we owe Him as antithetical to grace. The hard truths that Christ preached are assiduously avoided (or, if they are preached, they are done so in a reductionist manner, ‘principle-ized to the lowest common denominator, and/or with apologies that these hard truths are found in Scripture).

What a grand disservice to the doctrine of the believer-priest (not that our priesthood is in any measure a ‘hard truth’), for our priesthood is a holy calling (2 Tim 1:9). The believer, by the work and blood of Christ applied to him, is a set-apart ‘devoted thing’—uniquely *new creature* who is a part of a new humanity being constructed into a temple of living stones (Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:4-10; 10:14). He or she is a priest perfectly fashioned to offer up sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to God while proclaiming His excellencies.

An additional note regarding the courage to preach hard truths: In a recent conversation with a pastor in the south of India, he confessed to me that when he kept preaching primarily the boundless benefits of God’s grace, attendance dwindled. Only, when he began preaching the hard truths of Christ’s discourses did folks come to church eager to hear the truth, anxious to have their consciences dealt with, and ready to bow to Christ.

How easily do we miss the fact that the hard truths of Scripture are like a steel plow that harrows hardened consciences of religious sinners—that plowing process is necessary to prepare them for repentance and grace. The spiritual care involved in shepherding by believer-priests is a very effective place to proclaim ‘hard truths’—for in that relational space of shepherding there is love, personal concern, and care, and these are some of the greatest inducements for soul-searching transparency and true ongoing repentance and obedience.

But, there is also a related, and highly essential element of worship that is inherent in our priesthood. It is the ‘stewarding’ of the glory of our Savior. That is a role that is NOT reserved solely for members of a clerical class. Since every true believer is a priest appointed to offer up sacrifices, then every genuine believer is a diligent worshipper who lives for the glory of Christ (1 Pet 2:9-10). Without reluctance, we can say that the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer is joined to the full recognition of the throne rights of Jesus Christ. By this we mean that beholding Christ as enthroned Lord of glory is best achieved from the vantage point of a believer-priest.

Here is the reason why: since our priesthood is grounded in Christ’s High Priesthood—we are messengers and ambassadors of the King who appointed us to declare that through our Substitute, we serve an atoning, and atoned for God—therefore ‘be reconciled’ (2 Cor 5:19-20)! Our sight of the glorified Christ now, by faith in the gospel is our purchased right in the new covenant. Therefore, this transforming glory of Christ is NOT to be mediated solely by an ordained clergyman, but by the Word and the Spirit through the mouths of God’s people. A stratified clerical hierarchy that insulates the laity from glory belongs to the old covenant, not the new. In the new covenant, each believer priest has equal access to God through Christ (Eph 3:12).

In this matter of the priesthood of the believer, if there is to be reform in the church, then the question we need to address ought to be, “Do we preach, teach, live, and do church with this truth of our priesthood in mind?” Identification truths are essential positional doctrines that must be firmly entrenched in every believer’s mind, and affirmed often in one another. But, they are not cushions to rest upon. The NT believer’s designation as priest does not terminate on himself, instead it propels him into the world as Christ’s ambassador in service and witness. Thus, the priesthood of believers is not a privileged status upon which we recline; it is a commission which sends us forth into the world to exercise priestly ministry. The believer’s priesthood is a holy calling; a moral obligation and a personal vocation to fulfill.

So, why is the knowledge of this holy and privileged priestly calling so frequently pushed to the periphery? The fault lies not only with our Christian leaders, but also within our own hearts. We know that in both the OT, and in church history there was the constant tendency for people to take pride and solace in a visible figurehead. Our fallen hearts and weak faith tend to gravitate toward human leaders for security, blessing, belonging, glory, and honor. Paul warns and commands that we should oppose this proclivity: “So then let no one boast in men” (1 Cor 3:21).

In exposing this man-centered propensity, Luther stated that religion always tends to deteriorate and degrade into a system of honoring men. In fact, one could almost say that the more visible, popular, and influential a minister is, the greater the challenge will be to deflect the attention off of himself and onto the glory of Christ. It is a kind of an inverse proportion; the more of a celebrity pastor he is, the more the glory of Christ will potentially be obscured. But, why is that so? Our fallen natures, and what remains of them, are sensual, sight-oriented, tribal, and humanistic (1 Cor 1:10-17; 3:1-9; 2 Cor 10:12-16; Jas 2:1-13).

Although the children of Israel had all of the covenant promises of God as the only divinely chosen theocratic nation (Deut 4:32-38), they still pressured Samuel to appoint a fallible, mortal king so that Israel would be like the other nations. “Nevertheless, the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel, and they said, ‘No, but there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles’” (1 Sam 8:19-20). God told Samuel some heart-rending news: their plea for an earthly king was tantamount to the rejection of God Himself as their King (1 Sam 8:7-8).

When the men of Lystra sought to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas after they performed a miracle (Acts 14:11-18), Paul tore his robes and rushed out into the crowd with this rebuke: “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them” (Acts 14:15).

This author wonders aloud, are today’s mega-pastors prepared to tear their robes and rush into the crowd crying, ‘we are men of the same nature as you’. ‘Do not give to us the recognition, praise and honor meant for Christ alone’. ‘We don’t want it! It belongs to Christ alone’. How much courage would be required for an influential pastor to consistently labor to close the clergy-laity gap by preaching the priesthood of the believer? No doubt a great deal of

resolve, conviction, bravery, and devotion would be needed.

We reiterate that the priesthood of the believer is not merely a refinement or subpoint of the new covenant, the identity of the Christian as a believer-priest is a controlling identity which holistically affects ecclesiology, ministry, and worship. Christ's lordship over His church certainly includes His lordship over all of these areas. For, Christ Himself is the sphere in which our kingdom transfer took place, He is the sphere in which we were quickened out of our spiritual death, He is the sphere in which we are sustained by His immutable life (Col 2:9-15), and He is the sphere in which we fulfill our ministerial calling by His Spirit (whether clergyman or layman) (Gal 2:20).

This leads to an additional inquiry, "What kind of believer is the church producing today?" Is the church growing serious, active, faithful believer-priests who enthusiastically embrace their priestly privileges and responsibilities? We know that the answer is 'no'. But, how did the bar become set so low? The answer in part (actually rather to a great degree), is that ministers and members have engaged in an unspoken contract which centralizes shepherding in the pastorate (or neglects shepherding altogether). That mindset of course militates against the divinely ordained role of the believer-priest to engage in mutual shepherding (see Eph 4:14-16, 25-29; 5:15-21).

Due to the mix of self-generated ambition and modern technology, the celebrity preacher (though he would never acknowledge this title) seems to be more and more disconnected from the sorrows, temptations, and joys of the Christian life. His growing celebrity status makes him more and more disconnected from his sheep. Consequently, he becomes less a shepherd and more an evangelist. We have countless evangelists masquerading as pastors (*pastor* means 'shepherd'). These ministers study endlessly behind closed doors during the week preparing their next homiletical masterpiece for its destination on Sunday morning. Meanwhile the sheep during the week are neglected and relationally malnourished.

Congregants are not as impressed with a well-crafted sermon as much as they are with a man that truly cares for souls. In his book, *The Minister as Shepherd*, Charles Jefferson notes that many ministers today are only interested in the sheep that stay in the fold, they're not concerned about those outside the fold (the backsliding and the lost). The minister who is not a true shepherd feels incensed that his straying members have forsaken him. He resents their roving and is secretly glad they are gone. So, his attitude is this, if the sheep ramble off it's because of their own folly. If they straggle behind, they are not worth saving (pp. 56-57).

In a similar vein, Haffey opines: "Give me the man that stutters in the pulpit, and instead of eloquence, relentlessly bends his life in constant burden-bearing to care for souls God has entrusted to him. It is an interesting thing that when a man is continuously involved in shepherding souls, Monday through Saturday coupled with ongoing prayer and dependence on the Spirit, it will prove to bleed out of his heart on Sunday mornings. His sermons will become less robotic, less academic and more relational. As his heart is full with the trials, despair, love and joy's he experiences with his sheep (as opposed to endless interaction with books and commentaries) his preaching will most assuredly improve in a dramatic fashion.

If you know anything about John Bunyan you know he had a shepherd's heart. He said, "I preached what I felt." Bunyan's experience was the substance of his sermons. But, Bunyan's sentiment is increasingly rare today. How we need to return to the focus Charles Jefferson captures: "Men will love a true shepherd as they love no other man in all the world because a true shepherd has taught them how to love God" (Jefferson, p. 136).

Often it seems large congregation preachers are under the assumption that the work of Christ prospers only when crowds are assembled. As if the supreme problem of the church is how to devise attractive conferences with big names and food trucks.

The experience of the true shepherd who labors in the trenches (though often with far less glory)—by means of that shepherding lifestyle the preacher's Sunday messages will overflow with love and compassion which will bring the doctrine he preaches to life. Theology disconnected from every day experience becomes theoretical and abstract. Passion and fervor for the truth must be fueled by the trials and joys of everyday ministry (2 Tim 4:1-5).

Preachers that have the mindset that the pulpit cures all will find themselves disillusioned. Meanwhile, the sheep will suffer from lack of meaningful relationships and struggle in their everyday life being weighed down with heavy consciences. Haffey notes: "I've often heard pastors lament over their lack of relationships, declaring that pastoral care is one of the loneliest of callings. Sadly, it seems this is often of their own doing and absolutely should not be." "There is an ever-widening relational gap between overseers and their flocks. As 'elders' become more and more involved in meetings, organizational structure and policy, the members of the flock meanwhile are starving for true community. Making disciples is the calling of a true shepherd not 'building a ministry' through the endless pursuit of degrees, crafty positioning, and accumulating handpicked 'yes men'. Preaching is to supplement the calling to make disciples not be the primary means of making disciples."

In today's corporate way of "doing church" sheep often feel very disconnected from their shepherds as though they were always at arm's length distance—much as an employee feels when his superior walks in the room. Sheep need relating. Instead, they often sense an implied inferiority. They need to be secure in knowing that they are of equal status with their overseers. They need to "feel" that their pastor is a sinner just like them and in need of grace and care just like them, thus inducing joyful and willful submission as opposed to dutiful obedience. They need to be secure in knowing that they are of equal status with their pastors.

Though Christ be the source of all help, does He not use His ministers to reach His people? Yes, He does, but the sheep cannot imitate Christ in how He responds to sin—they cannot imitate Christ's repentance—for Christ needed no repentance. A shepherd is not a shepherd unless he has a shepherd's heart and that requires a willingness to shun the limelight when it becomes too bright. He must show himself not as a cape-bearing 'super preacher' but a lowly and humble servant. He must have the heart of a desperate beggar in need of being loved, reproved, and admonished himself.

Great pulpit efforts are often a distant memory, but true shepherds live in the hearts of those that have seen them in their vulnerable and most open condition. These faithful men

have spent significant time with the sheep and have demonstrated selfless love toward them. Faithful shepherding requires soul-on-soul care. It requires humility, mutual confession, and genuine love and concern. But, these virtues tend to be weak or absent in a professional ministry.

Symptomatic of this professionalism is the methodology of bringing in a senior shepherd unknown to the flock. This ‘resume approach’ resembles more the hiring of an executive than it does the recognition of, and laying hands upon a shepherd in the NT model. In the business model approach, pastoral search committees are formulated much like the corporate head hunter. These committees set criteria that often place a high premium on big personalities with strong communication skills and numerous academic degrees. The apostle Paul appeared to give no value to these methods of evaluation, and instead considered them worldly and regarded those that implemented them to be spiritually immature (1 Cor 1:18-21ff.).

What this call to shepherding means for the priesthood of the believer is immense, for the believer-priest is to devote him or herself to the care of fellow members of the body (1 Cor 12:14-25). Through the Word and the Spirit, and through personal equipping (discipleship), the believer-priest has everything he or she needs to learn to shepherd fellow believers. Author Charles Ver Straten does not mince words when he states: “The bulk of the shepherding in a church should be done by lay people. Christians that are not using their gifts are living in a sub-biblical lifestyle” (Charles Ver Straten, *A Caring Church*, p. 9). “When the senior pastor usurps for himself the role of shepherding there are short and long range degenerative effects. The negatives would be; the laity is not equipped or prepared for works of service for building up the body; members are deprived of doing the Lord’s service. Their potential usefulness is stymied. People become over dependent on the pastor alone. Because he retained the exclusive right to shepherd, they are unprepared to fend for themselves when the wolf comes” (Ibid, pp. 19-20).

How sobering. Let us not forget that great pulpit efforts on Sunday are often a distant memory by Friday, but true shepherds live in the hearts of those that have seen them in their vulnerable and most open condition. Those that have spent significant time with the sheep and demonstrated selfless love toward them. Faithful shepherding requires life-on-life soul care. It requires humility, mutual confession, and genuine love and concern.

Our priesthood must be frequently appropriated, for only then will the church be healthy and vital. David and Paul Watson provide a hard-hitting summary of the need for reform in the church today leading to obedience, for change is needed that takes the priesthood of the believer seriously: “The priesthood of believers is incredibly important to disciple-making. It affirms the work of the Spirit in the lives of all believers. It affirms the ministry potential of all believers. It affirms the responsibility of all believers and it empowers all believers to function as needed for the ministry of the church. By contrast what do we see today? We see a strengthening of the priesthood of the pastoral staff only. Somehow all the ministry of the church has been focused in one position even though the Bible is clear that there are multiple leadership roles” (David and Paul Watson, *Contagious Disciple-making*, p. 51).

The biblical doctrine of the priesthood of every believer comes with at least two safe guards. The first, believers are commanded to be clothed with humility and to be subject to their elders (1 Pet 5:5-6). For, faithful elders who truly shepherd the flock ‘watch over souls as those who will give an account’ (Heb 13:17). And, a second safe guard: the believer’s priestly role is always joined to its corporate expression. In other words, our priestly role is not defined primarily as ‘private judgment’, but rather, ‘informed judgment’. And, informed judgment always involves members of the body of Christ together discerning and affirming the truth as the Word and doctrine are declared (1 Cor 14:29; Titus 2:1).

Under the Old Covenant Moses could only dream of a fully ministering laity. After learning of a Spirit-led ministry being conducted by two laymen, a young apprentice, Joshua came rushing in to defend Moses’ ministry declaring, “stop them!” Moses rebukes his young disciple emphatically stating, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them” (Num 11:29).

Moses, looked forward to the inauguration of a better covenant procured by a better eternal High Priest, based on better promises, where God would place His Own Spirit inside EVERY believer. As Christ would come to unify the office of Priest and King, believers are now encouraged by the soul-ravishing truth that their position is one of a hand-selected (chosen) priesthood (1 Pet. 2:4), and that they will reign with the Lord forever singing a “new” song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth (Rev 5:9-10).”

Let us join together and exhort one another to answer His upward call and truly live as priests of our Great God and Savior. Insist that your church make one of its aims to develop the priesthood of each believer. Occupying our priestly duties and privileges now in worship, mutual edification, intercession, proclamation, and witness is the best ‘practice’ imaginable for the eternal service and reign God has reserved for His Kingdom of priests and kings (Rev 1:5-6).