

THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

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If I could come to your church one Sunday morning and ask each member, “what does the priesthood of all believers mean?” I suspect that most of the members would not know how to answer. How can I as a female lay leader be a priest? In what sense are our pastors priests? The truth is that we don’t generally consider our leaders to be priests and in Latin America we are surrounded by a confessional church with priests and a Pope in the Vatican and as we are the minority group we react to this type of priesthood. However the Bible does talk about “the priesthood of all the believers” and this was one of the slogans of the Protestant Reformation and because of this we do need to try to understand this concept.

The first question that we need to ask ourselves is, “What is a priest?” There could be several meanings. However, essentially a priest is a mediator, a person who makes the bridge between God and man. A priest could also be considered to be the person who administers sacred things.

Robert Brow in his book about the origins of different world religions demonstrates that “The essence of a priesthood religion is the formation of a group of people who claim control the access to God.”¹ Brow shows that the majority of the religions of the world have had or have now priests who specialize in contacting the people with the divine. In some civilizations such as Babylon the high priest was also the king. In the Judeo-Christian revelation God provided a sacrificial system for his people in the Old Testament, but the paradigm changed in the New Testament. God himself became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ who died as a victim, rose from the dead and according to the Book of Hebrews is our high Priest who now is in the presence of God in the Holy of Holies interceding for us.

The New Testament also talks about believers as priests. In order to understand this enigma we need firstly to look at the scriptures which mention this truth. Later need to examine some historic moments especially the Protestant Reformation where the priesthood in the church was seriously questioned and we need to try to understand the significance of the doctrine for us today.

Essentially there are four passages in the Bible that treat this theme. The three passages in the New Testament reflect Exodus 19:6 where God was formulating a treaty or pact with his People. In the introduction to this treaty God describes his people as a “Kingdom of Priests” a “holy nation”. The impression that this verse give is that God is calling his people to have a mission; they are to mediate between God and the other nations of the worlds these phrases in Exodus express the universal mission of God the *misseo dei*.

¹ Robert Brow, *Religión y sus ideas* (London: Tyndale, 1966), 22.

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This concept is repeated in 1 Peter 2:5-10, Revelation 1:6 and 5:10. In the Passage of 1 Peter the new people of God, the church is compared to a spiritual building where everyone is a priest. There is no longer a need for a priestly order from the tribe of Levi where it was necessary to make animal sacrifices. The sacrifices will no longer be of animals but will be moral and spiritual sacrifices; devotion to God (Romans 12:1), including the sacrifice of Praise (Hebrews 13:15) and of service to each other (Hebrews 13:16). In this passage as in Exodus the priesthood has a missiological function “royal priesthood... to show forth the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (v. 9). The universal church is mediator between God and the World. The verses in Revelation reflect the same idea. One thing is really clear in the New Testament, no minister or elder in any place is called a priest. The only priest is Jesus.

From the third century onwards the priesthood of all believers was not visible in theological thinking. In medieval times believers who were neither monks nor priests were considered to be second class Christians. Taking these distortions into account Martin Luther protested that at baptism all were consecrated as priests without exception. Everyone has the same access to God, to his word and to the sacraments. All vocations are worthy before God whether the person is a pastor, farmer or shoemaker. The calling of the lay people has equal value as ways for people to serve God. Because the work is for God it is important to do the job well. In this new paradigm, whoever has the call to be a minister or leader of a congregation is not more important than anyone else, they just have another specific function which the church has asked them to fulfill.

Because each Christian is a priest they can exercise power with God through Prayer, receive pardon without going to a confessional box, read and interpret the Bible on their own. However, in the Lutheran Church as well as in other churches which grew out of the Reformation, ordained clergy continued to hold a great deal of influence over their congregations. Obviously this doctrine was very revolutionary for its time and birthed several different groups of protestant traditions. David Bosch observes that up to a certain point the multiplication of independent churches within Protestantism should be seen as an application “to the enth degree” of the principle of universal priesthood². It could be said then that what a virtue was in one time brought into being as a consequence innumerable divisions to the church.

The Lutheran slogan about the priesthood of all believers did much to stimulate Christian thinking. The confessional churches (Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, Anglican, inter alia) recognized that all believers are priest with equal access to God, and members of a church which testifies to the world, and they also recognized that from this group of priests would be chosen “a ministerial priesthood” who would function as pastors and ordained clergy trained to guide the congregation in worship and the administration of the sacraments. Theologians admitted the existence of “the general priesthood” and the “ministerial priesthood”. Even the Catholic church admitted in their document *Lumen Gentium* the place for the “common priesthood” and Ministerial Priesthood”.³ Up to what point are our clergy “Ministerial priests”?

² David Bosch, *Misión en transformación* (Grand Rapids :Libros Desafío, 2000), 302.

³ Vatican II Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution of the Church).

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One of the problems that tends to repeat itself in history is that clergy tend to take too much power for themselves leaving the lay people as passive worshipers without much opportunity to use their gifts. In the eighteenth century the Age of John Wesley, the Anglican Church scarcely gave any place to the layman. Wesley's ministry was very interesting. The small groups and the societies that he formed gave many opportunities to enable an army of lay people to be able to use their gifts. In a sermon entitled "the ministerial office"⁴ Wesley taught that there was a difference between the role of a prophet who does not require ordination and can preach and the role of a priest who should be an ordained clergyman. The Methodist preachers could gallop taking the message of the gospel to all over the towns and villages while at the same time the believers should take the sacrament of the Holy Communion and worship under the leadership of a "ministerial Priest".

Juan Wesley considered himself to be an Anglican Priest till the day of his death. He considered the sacrament of Holy Communion as an important means of grace which should be administered by an ordained minister. He believed that Jesus was present in a real way in the Holy Communion service, not within the elements of bread and wine but by and through his Spirit. Wesley encouraged all Methodists to take Holy Communion at least once a week. How many times do we celebrate the Lord's Supper each year? Do we understand how this sacrament can be a "means of grace" for us?

It is important to note here the priestly role that the pastor or leader of a church service has in the liturgical practice of the church. The pastor should facilitate a genuine experience of adoration. He plays an intermediary role helping the congregation get nearer to God. This is part of our Wesleyan heritage. The document written by our General Superintendents says "Worship is the highest expression of our love to God... it constitutes the essence of our identity."⁵ Are there moments of genuine worship in our services, or are we merely following rituals and traditions blindly without thinking about the meaning of what we are doing?

Here we need to demonstrate how the "Ministerial priesthood" functions within the "Priesthood of all believers." Wesley did not teach that the priests were mediators between God and man, because only Jesus has this role. The priests should be considered as ambassadors or representatives of the kingdom of God, who announce his kingdom through the preaching of the Word and in the sacraments. Pastors are called to the church to serve.⁶

Even though we are Wesley's heirs our ordained clergy should administer the sacraments in our congregations it is important to note the following: The ministers should work to help the congregation to learn how to serve. The ministers are ordained as "priests" to train all the members of the church how to discover the true meaning of the "Priesthood of all believers" discovering their gifts in order to minister fully as a lay priesthood⁷ If the clergy are called to be

⁴ Sermon No. 121, "The Ministerial Office: Prophets and Priests" (1872, Source: Northwest Nazarene College, Wesley Center for Applied Theology).

⁵ Junta de Superintendentes Generales, *Un pueblo cristiano, de santidad, misional*, Documento de los valores esenciales de la Iglesia del Nazareno (1999), 9.

⁶ Kenneth Collins, *John Wesley's Concept of Ministerial Office* (see at <http://www.wesley.nnu.edu>).

⁷ Lesley Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd* (Madras: CLC, 1977), 43-44.

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ministers it is not to control the rest of the congregation, but so that the whole church can be fully equipped and encouraged to fulfill the priestly task of Jesus for humanity.

One of the reasons the church doesn't grow is that the members are not committed. They are not conscience of their gifts and the role that God has for them. When the members are passive, and they aren't committed, it is time to pray for revival. In a time of revival, it is notorious how lay men and women filled with the Spirit discover anew the fullness of all Christians. The church is the body of Christ and represents the incarnation of Jesus Christ in our world today. Just as in our body the parts have different functions, so it is that each member has different gifts. But each member needs to be filled with the Spirit because effectively without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5).

In the sixth century before Christ there was a movement which rejected the power of the priests in several religions, whether they were Hindu Brahmans or the Jewish priest in the times of Isaiah and Jeremiah. It appears that this rejection of the priestly ministry led to the foundation of Buddhism and Judaism, purged of false prophets and cheating priests. By the time of Jesus, the priests had come back as religious power and we see Jesus time and time again, confronting them until the end when these confrontations led to his death. We have seen it during the medieval time the monks and priests took control of all religious matters. Luther put these priests in their place. By Wesley's time the Anglican Church was again under the power of the priests. The question is, "what is it like in our days?" We see in the Christian media the supposed rediscovery of the five ministries of apostle, prophets, pastors, teacher and evangelists. Some supposed prophets and apostle exercise very strong control over their congregations, so much so that the lay people are not able to exercise their gifts and feel frustrated. Rick Warren has expressed it so well; the church board and the pastor should be *administers* and the members, the ministers (those who minister).⁸

On the other hand a lot of individualism has been manifested and some groups are not prepared to admit to ecclesiastic authority, leaving the congregation and forming another denomination dividing the Body of Christ in numerous little pieces. The priesthood of all believers does not imply that each individual can interpret Scriptures however they want.

In our times many people are talking about the ministry of lay people in the church and the priesthood of all believers. I suspect that people do not understand completely what the priesthood of all believers really is. What is the relationship between the task of public ministry and the priesthood of all believers? The Scriptures affirm that the Universal Church is a priesthood that has a missionary role to a world that God loves and is seeking to save. It is evident that before God all of us are equal. It should be clear that a "minister" is not more important than his lay brother and that the work of both has equal importance. The Scriptures show the need for leaders for our congregations although the primitive church hasn't given us a very clear model to follow. The role of the pastor as a priest leading his congregation in worship and the administration of the Word and the Sacraments is evident.

Dale Kleimola, in his Doctor of Ministry project, suggested the following roles for the members as priests.

⁸ Cited by George Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 129.

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1. The proclamation of the gospel. The church is the principal agent of the mission of God. We've seen this in 1 Peter 1:5-9.
2. The congregation has the responsibility to call leaders to serve as ministers whether preachers, deacons or missionaries to other lands. (In Acts 6 we see the church call deacons and in Acts 13 we see the church send out Saul and Barnabas as missionaries).
3. The congregation has the authority to test the ministry of the Word and discern when there is false teaching (Eph. 4:15).
4. Every member needs to discover their gifts and work together and work together as a united body submitting one to another in love (1 Cor. 12 and Rom. 12).
5. Provide comfort and restoration. There should be a counseling ministry at all levels (Gal. 6:1-2).
6. The church should mutually encourage its members to do good and serve. We are called to be like Christ and to use our hands as agents of love. We are all called to minister.

Every member should realize their gift and use it in harmony with the other members and under the leadership that God has given to the church. There should be teamwork between the pastor and the lay members.⁹ According to David Bosch, there is a huge movement of lay people in the churches. Many of the missionaries that went to the four corners of the world were lay people and they did a great job. There is an intense discussion about the role of the lay person in the church, which has never been seen before in the history of the Church. Probably the future of the church depends on the mobilization of all the members whose composition is fundamentally lay. In the last 40 years many small groups have emerged, whether they be cell groups in the Protestant sector or “basal communities” in the Catholic Church where the lay people are exercising a fundamental role.¹⁰ (10). The priesthood of the ordained ministry exists to facilitate the priesthood of all the church members. Because we are a missional people, we need a more organic and less clerical church in order to complete our mission. We should follow the footsteps of the most famous layman of all time, the carpenter of the little town of Nazareth.

⁹ Dale M. Kleimola, *Public Ministry and the Priesthood of all Believers: Partnership in Joy*, D.Min. Project for Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri (see at <http://www.ministryhealth.net/mh>).

¹⁰ David Bosch, op. cit., 569-577.