

THE UNIVERSAL PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS

(Reaction to Dorothy Bullón's paper)

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It is wonderful to be able to think of the privilege that God has given to his children to approach the “throne of grace” with confidence through the mediation of our “Great High Priest”, Jesus Christ. We no longer need human mediators. Every Christian as a priest can worship God directly and invite other to do the same.

The theme of the “Priesthood of all believers”, developed by Professor Dorothy Bullon, is very excellent. It has a wide, Biblical, historical and contextual base. She starts to define the concept of “priest” as mediator, as someone who makes a bridge between God and men. She interprets Exodus 19:6 as considering the people of Israel as a people mediating between God and the nations expressing, “the universal mission of God’.

She emphasized the priestly function of Christians according to 1 Peter 2:5-10, and Revelation 1:6 and 5:10 as offering spiritual and moral sacrifices of devotion to God. She emphasized the missionary function of the priesthood of all believers, “in order to declare the praises of him who called you out darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

Historically, Luther, in opposition of the priestly system of the Roman Catholic Church, recalled the Biblical teaching about the priesthood of all believers, declaring the presence of human priests unnecessary. However, various confessional churches believe that “there is a body of general priests who choose their ‘priestly ministers’”. The Roman Catholic Church also believes this (*Catechism* of the Roman Catholic Church, 1992, 188).

According to the teaching of John Wesley, Bullón shows the role of priest as pastor and leader of liturgy helping the people come close to God. They are not mediators of salvation; neither do they control the people. Their responsibility is to equip believers for service according to their gifts. It is important to remember that at times the concept of the priesthood of all believers has been falsely interpreted, resulting in divisions, lack of respect for the pastors and abuse of authority. Professor Bullón emphasizes the fundamental role of all believers as priest is missional and liturgical.

I am totally in agreement with this well-founded investigation about the priesthood of all believers. However, I believe there are other considerations that we need to take into account as we deal with this doctrine. In the first place, as we live in a region where the Roman Catholic Church is strong, the emphasis on the term “priest” applied to believers, and in a special way to ministers, sounds a little like competition or imitation. It could be interpreted that we are using this term to gain social acceptance or prestige or that we are just beginning to discover the priestly order for the Protestant churches.

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On the other hand, the Catholic priesthood is currently held in very low esteem. We could become in some way linked to this situation which would be negative for developing close relations with the community if we call ourselves priests.

For these reasons, it would be better to use terms that are closer to the New Testament times which evangelical have been using since the Reformation. Instead of “priests”, we should say ministers, pastors, elders and deacons. Professor Bullón affirms “one thing is very clear in the New Testament, in no place is a minister or elder called a priest. The only priest is Jesus.” Excellent! If he is the only priest there is no place for any more. Is there any way in which believers can be called “priests”?

In second place, the term priest in Exodus 9:6 and in 1 Peter 1: 5-9 should not be understood in its literal sense. We know there are many figures of speech in the Bible. In reference to Exodus 9:6, Adam Clarke says that the phrase “kingdom of priests” refers to a theocracy in Israel’s government: the king is in Jerusalem and the subjects, “priests”; all are worshippers, all makes sacrifices, every individual offering the victim for himself or herself. We can only understand this in metaphorical terms. God strictly forbade anyone from outside the tribe of Levi to carry out priestly office. We can remember the case of Saul, who offered a burnt offering without waiting for Samuel, (1 Sam. 13:12-14); and in the case of Uzziah who tried to offer incense usurping the priestly role (2 Chronicles 26:16). The consequences were terrible.

In the same way, in 1 Peter 2:5-9 we find metaphoric language, starting with verse 4 which refers to Jesus as a “Living Stone” and so, following the metaphor in verse 6, Adam Clarke affirms that the living stones, the believers, make up a large temple in which God is adored and where he manifests himself as in the old temple. Each Christian is a spiritual sacrifice or priest (Romans 12:1-2), offering praise and thanksgiving to God through Christ by whose merits we are all accepted.

In 1 Peter 2:9, after a pause, Paul takes up again the metaphor that he used in verse 5. In this passage we can see that Paul is applying the same titles that were used in the old covenant, signed by circumcision, are now applied to Christians in the same way to all Christians in Christ, whether we be Jews or Gentiles. We are a people of priests, God is the King and Christ is our Great High Priest. The dignity of believers is compared to the highest dignity on earth, one of kings and priests.

In the same way Purkiser (et al.) says, “The church of Christ has been designed to function *as* a priest (emphasis added) towards a sinful world, to intercede on its behalf so that the people can have forgiveness and be transformed”. We understand that this includes repentance and faith in Jesus. We note in the first place that the priesthood belongs to the church as a community; then we see that the functions of the church are compared to the functions of a priest. The use of simile by the author is evident. Also, according to Purkiser, the priestly responsibility of the church is to suffer if necessary, to lead sinners to Christ (1991:590). However, this suffering is not vicarious; it represents the cost of discipleship.

In this sense, the priesthood of all believers should be understood in figurative terms. Due to the privilege that believers have to come into God’s presence directly, through the

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mediation of Jesus Christ, they are the same as priests, offering spiritual and moral sacrifices of devotion to God (Rom. 12:1) including the sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15) and service to all (Heb. 13:6).

In the same way that Israel was to be an example to the nations, Christians are called to announce, “The praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). So the term “priest”, whether it refers to lay people or ministers, should not go beyond the figurative meaning of the Biblical text.

In the same sense José Luis Martínez says, “The theological interpretation should preferably be based on literal texts”. This does not mean that we should not discard figurative language to express a doctrine but this process should be controlled by “texts using a literal meaning”. Martínez gives the following example, “The effort to spiritualize the Levitical priesthood and use it as a justification for the clerical priesthood should be categorically rejected because it does not have New Testament verification”. Then he emphasizes, “No important doctrine should be based on figurative texts where there is no undisputable support from other texts where the literal texts are clear” (1984: 229-230). With respect to this, we could ask two appropriate questions, is there sufficient literal base in the Bible to develop a doctrine of the priesthood of all believers? Should there be a place for it in our Articles of Faith in the *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene*?

In third place, another aspect we could comment on is the eschatological sense of the priesthood of all believers. In their explicatory and exegetical commentary on the Bible, Jamison, Fausset, and Brown, have a final relevant point to make as they describe 1 Peter 2:5-9. They said that believers, like Christ, the anti-type of Melchizedek, are both “kings” and “priests”. Israel, in a spiritual sense, should have the same function between the nations and the world, “the full realization of such priestly functions, both for the literal Israel as well as the spiritual, is still in the future”. However, we believe that the missional vocation of all believers is for the present. It is to announce the excellences and the glories of the One who called us from darkness into light. This includes worship, testimony, preaching and service.

In Revelation 1:6, “kingdom” is emphasized more than priests, reflecting Exodus 19:6 “the kingdom of priests”, and this is paralleled in 1 Peter 2:5-9. We notice the eschatological tendency that the saints will build the unique kingdom of God and they themselves will be “kings” (Rev. 5:10). They will share their royal and priestly throne in the millennial kingdom...serving day and night in his temple (Rev. 7:15; 5:10) (Jamison, Fausset, and Brown).

In Revelation 20:6, the author talks about the blessings of those who participate in the first resurrection and concludes saying, “they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years”. John Wesley comments that we will be reigning with Christ, not on earth, but in heaven (Beacon Commentary). The most important thing is that we will be with Christ and it does not matter where.

In this way, the “priesthood of all believers” has temporal and eternal dimensions. The position of dignity of the believers brings with it great responsibilities. It challenges us to

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faithfully complete our mission as Nazarenes that worship God in the beauty of holiness, and “the praises of him who calls us from darkness into light”.

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