

THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on July 23, 1967 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

The message which I present to you today would be considered quite strange by most of the religious people in our land today. Many would consider it completely unrealistic and would differ with its message at almost every point. I believe it to be true, however, and therefore I present it to you at this time. I can best introduce the theme to you by asking a few simple questions: "Who has the authority to perform a wedding ceremony? Who can conduct a funeral? Who can baptize a penitent believer into Christ? Who can administer the Lord's supper?" Many would answer that only a man who is an ordained preacher, only a member of the clergy, can perform these functions.

In this connection it is interesting to note that there is no ordination ceremony mentioned in the New Testament for those who would begin to preach Christ's gospel. Not only is there no example of an ordination ceremony, but neither are there instructions about how such a ceremony should be conducted. Perhaps even more basic is the fact that there is no distinction in all of the New Testament between what is generally today called clergy and laity. All of the Christians were "saints" and there were no distinctions of the clergy-laity variety among them.

Martin Luther, as perhaps the foremost leader of the Reformation Movement, advocated "the priesthood of all believers." This was a very radical but most vital change. One need only to glance back through the first sixteen centuries of Christian history and to remember the gradual rise of the ecclesiastical system of Rome and the corresponding dominant position of the priesthood to realize how radical a change Luther was suggesting. It might at this point also be valuable to remember that along with his "priesthood of all believers," Luther added a corollary doctrine, "the opening of the Bible to all Christians." Together, these were two of the greatest and most significant contributions of the entire Reformation Movement.

What Is the Teaching of the New Testament?

On the point under discussion there are two opposing ideas: (1) An ecclesiastical, sacramental emphasis in which priests and clergy are central. According to this view the validity of religious acts depends upon their having been performed by an ordained clergyman. It is here that the "apostolic succession" becomes crucially important. One must have had hands laid upon him by a bishop upon whom hands had been laid by a bishop upon whom hands had been laid ... on back to the apostles themselves. This theory is widely held among some of the largest and oldest religious groups today. (2) The priesthood-of-all-believers emphasis of the New Testament. Here let us turn to the scriptures to see what they actually teach concerning this subject. Let us begin with I Peter 2:5 and 9, "Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ ... But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may show forth the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

Notice particularly the expressions "holy priesthood" and "offer up spiritual sacrifices." From these statements of the apostle Peter it is obvious that every Christian is a priest. The Hebrew letter also plainly indicates that Christ is our high priest, and that each Christian need not go to God through the medium of an earthly priest or mediator, but that he can come directly to God through Christ as high priest. One might ask, "What are the spiritual sacrifices which the Christian is to offer?" The apostle Paul in Rom. 12:1 gives us a direct answer, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service."

Let us look further into this twelfth chapter of Romans for here we find a comprehensive and definitive statement of God's plan for the members of his church. "For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members have not the same office: so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another. And having gifts differing according to the grace that was given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of our faith; or ministry, let us give ourselves to our ministry; or he that teacheth, to his teaching; or he that exhorteth, to his exhorting: he that giveth, let him do it with liberality; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness." (Rom. 12:4-8).

Like A Human Body

In both Romans 12 and I Cor. 12 the apostle Paul uses the illustration of the human body, with its eyes, ears, feet, hands, heart, lungs, and other parts. He makes the comparison between this physical body and the spiritual body of Christ, the church. In the church there are many members, all equally necessary and important in God's sight, and the various members function according to their abilities and training. Some are pulpit spokesmen, some are elders, some are deacons, some carry on the business functions of the church, some are especially good in caring for the needy, and so on through all of the Lord's work. None are clergy and none are laity, but all are Christians on the same level in God's sight.

A study of the beginning of the early church indicates this equality. In Acts 6 we read of the problem that arose concerning the neglect of the Grecian widows. The apostles said, "It is not right that we should forsake the word of God, and serve tables." Accordingly, seven men were chosen to "serve tables," and their names are listed in Acts 6:5. Among them we find the names of Stephen and Philip. The point that I make, however, is that later in this same chapter we find Stephen preaching with great power and in the following chapter we read his sermon before the Hellenistic critics who had been disturbed by his preaching. At the end of the chapter we read of his martyrdom. Here was a man who was chosen to serve tables, but who was one of the greatest of the early preachers. The same story is found in connection with Philip, who began by serving tables. However, by the time we come to Acts 8 he is preaching in Samaria and also is responsible for the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. He was another who was chosen to serve tables, but who also became a most effective evangelist.

In Acts 16, we read of Paul at Troas. The Gentile doctor Luke came in contact with Paul, probably to assist Paul in connection with his "thorn in the flesh." In any case, Luke was taught concerning Christ and became a Christian. He then traveled with Paul as a kind of unofficial personal physician. Later, he wrote the gospel which bears his name and also the book of Acts. Here is a medical man playing a most important spiritual role in the early church. He was not theologically trained, but was rather a devout and talented instrument which the Lord used greatly.

All Ye Are Brethren

We find this same situation in connection with the apostles. They were fishermen, farmers, tax-collectors, and the like. The rulers at Jerusalem called them "unlearned and ignorant men" because they were not theologically trained. They were simply average men who were deeply impressed with Christ and his teaching, and who became the great evangelists who established and launched the early church. In Acts 20:4 we read of seven men who traveled with Paul and who became evangelists by associating with this great apostle. In Acts 8:4, we read that although the apostles remained behind at Jerusalem, the rest of the Jerusalem Christians were driven out of Jerusalem by persecution, and that "They therefore that were scattered abroad went about preaching the word." It appears that in one way or another every Christian was a preacher of his new found treasure, the gospel of Christ. They knew nothing about certain ones set apart by special ordination services to be clergy, who would then have the responsibility of preaching, while all other Christians would be marked as laity.

But, let the Lord himself make the point. Speaking of the Pharisees, he said, "They make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, and love the chief place at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogue, and the salutations in the market places, and to be called of men, Rabbi. But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your teacher, and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father on the earth: for one is your Father, even he who is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your master, even the Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be humbled; and whosoever shall humble himself shall be exalted." (Matt. 23:5-12). Christians are to be brethren, not Rabbis, Fathers, Reverends, Doctors, nor wearers of any other ecclesiastical title of distinction. It might here also be of significance to note that the apostle Paul's letters are addressed to the churches, to all the members, and not just to the leaders.

What Is the Meaning of the Priesthood of All Believers?

First of all, this expression means that all Christians have free and direct access to God without necessity of priest or human mediator. Secondly, it means that every Christian is a priest or minister, and has a ministry to perform. He cannot ignore this responsibility and cannot shift its fulfillment to someone else.

Elton Trueblood, in his book, *Your Other Vocation*, p. 30, says, "Most Protestants pay lip service to the Reformation doctrine of priesthood of every believer, but they do not thereby mean to say every Christian is a minister. Many hasten to add that all they mean by the familiar doctrine is that nobody needs to confess to a priest, since each can confess directly to God. The notion that this doctrine erases the distinction between laymen and minister is seldom presented seriously, and would to some, be shocking, but it does not take much study of the New Testament to realize that the early Christians actually operated on this revolutionary basis." J. B. Lightfoot, back near the turn of the last century, wrote in his *The Christian Ministry*, P. 6., "The only priests under the gospel, designated as such in the New Testament, are the saints, the members of the Christian brotherhood."

The New Testament is full of expressions referring to "calling," "being called," "called out," and other such terms. All of these refer to all Christians and not to a professional clergy. People often have the idea that the primary responsibility for the Lord's work rests on preachers. Preachers alone, however, cannot do all that must be done. When the responsibility to preach to Christians, to evangelize, to administer, to help those in need, to counsel, to visit, and the other works of the church are placed upon preachers it becomes an impossible task. Every Christian must be active in the Lord's work if it is to be done well. The idea is common that being a Christian makes only a few demands on a person: (a) a few moral requirements; and (b) a few institutional relationships. But this is not the case. Christianity makes heavy demands upon everyone who would belong to Christ. Findley B. Edge, in his *A Quest for Vitality in Religion*, P. 97, says, "When one unites with the community of believers, when one enters into the priesthood of believers, he is thereby uniting with Jesus in God's redemptive purpose in the world." Every Christian is a minister and has the responsibilities of helping in the Lord's Cause.

Our Primary Ministry Is In the World

The Christian's work must largely be done "in the world." By this we do not mean in the worldliness of the world, but that his work must be done out among the people who are not yet Christians. This is the teaching of the scriptures. (Acts 8:4). It is in the world where the Christian's time is spent, where he works, studies, plays, and lives. "The preacher" cannot possibly get around to all the places where the influence of Christ is needed. This influence is needed in the home, the office, the shop, the service station, the farm, the factory and everywhere else. Nor can "the preacher" see all of the people who need to be seen. Every Christian must be involved, and fortunately every Christian is exactly where he needs to be--in the various places and activities where men and women are who need Christ.

It is in the world where the need is. The lower income groups, the labor unions, the chief executives, the managers, the students, the entertainers, and other groups of our world are the ones who need to hear of Christ. Too long has the church retired to the prosperous suburbs and let the rest of the world go by. Only when every Christian realizes that he is a minister of Christ and has a responsibility to bring Christ to every creature on earth will the job be done. A few clergymen could never conceivably do the job.

In view of all of this, we must conclude that the Lord wants Christians to live clean, pure lives among their fellowmen. They must be examples of honesty, truthfulness, and integrity. They must possess wholesome, cheerful, positive attitudes. They must love those about them, have time for them, and help meet their needs. Then, Christians will find people with open hearts and minds whom they may teach and guide to Christ. Every Christian a minister, working actively each day in the world of men, is the New Testament pattern. It turned the world upside down for Christ in the generation in that first century. It will do it today, if we will only use the Lord's method.

The primary emphasis, therefore, ought not to be what is done on Sunday in the church building, but rather upon what is done in the world during the week. We ought to measure the greatness of the church, not by how many attend on Sunday, but rather by what those who attend do in the world during the week.

Conclusion

Churches of Christ have long resisted the "pastor system" with its emphasis upon a hired clergy. Let us continue to resist this almost universal trend in the religious world about us. Let us remember that there are no clergy and no laity, but simply saints who belong to Christ and who must spend their lives working for him. Every Christian is needed and expected in the Lord's work. Every Christian is called to work for the Lord. Every Christian is expected to use his talent, whether it be one, or two, or five, for the Lord. All are equally important; all are equally needed. Let us be thankful for the reality and the challenge of the "priesthood of all believers."