

# The Priesthood of All Believers

***“You are  
A CHOSEN  
RACE, A royal  
PRIESTHOOD,  
A HOLY NATION,  
A PEOPLE FOR  
God’s OWN  
POSSESSION, so  
that you may  
proclaim the  
excellencies of  
Him who has  
called you out of  
darkness into His  
marvelous light.”***

***—I Peter 2:9, New  
American Standard  
Bible***

**PETER REVEALS THAT WE,** as Christians, constitute a royal priesthood. He embellishes that description by also identifying us as a “holy priesthood.” (I Pet. 2:5) All true believers constitute this priesthood—as our title states, it is the Priesthood of All Believers. The function of this priesthood is to proclaim the excellency of God, who has called us “out of darkness into His marvelous light.” Our mission in life is clear. We, as a priesthood, are to proclaim the excellence,

beauty and glory of God to all. This should daily fill us with hope, joy, love, faith and zeal.

Our priesthood is one of enlightenment. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp

and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”—Matt. 5:14-16, *NASB*

Whatever relevance the concept of a priesthood of all believers may have to the modern world, it exercised an enormously potent power for change at the time of the Reformation. As a battle cry at that time, it played a key role in opening the door to the great liberties that we now enjoy. Perhaps we do not adequately appreciate these freedoms. The right to own a Bible did not exist in times past, nor the privilege to base Christian belief and practices solely on the Bible’s testimony. The freedom of exercising individual conscience toward God was denied.

The Christian world of five centuries ago was highly structured and authoritarian. It did not tolerate dissent, nor recognize the individual’s sense of right and wrong. That stands in marked contrast to the Christian liberty that we enjoy today in most of the world. We take for granted the rights of the individual, but the validity of that concept was not acknowledged prior to the Reformation.

## **LOSING THE VISION, FALLING ASLEEP**

The understanding of personal responsibility grew vague as the Early Church settled into the passage of time. Spiritual slumber overtook many, and they fell asleep with regard to their privileges as members of the priesthood of all believers. From today’s perspective, it is easy to see how the personal rights of Christian believers were abrogated. Gradually, from the days of the founding of our faith, the zeal

and conviction of believers was diluted. Christianity eventually became the state religion of the Roman Empire. Everyone had to belong to the church; it was not open to personal choice. Thus the watering down of faith occurred as multitudes joined the Christian church out of compulsion, not desire. Subsequently, many attached themselves to the church which had little zeal, nor real faith. These forced converts soon outnumbered the core of true believers. As such, these non-spiritual, immature Christians let the more advanced ones think, believe and pray on their behalf. A great divide slowly developed between the class of people that soon were marked with the label “laity,” and their spiritual rulers, the “clergy.”

With this development, access to God for the common man was made difficult. Soon the clergy became intermediaries between their flocks and God. This gap was widened still further by introducing the concept that saints of time past were needed as additional intercessors. The unfortunate result of this was that personal access to God was now made to appear impossible.

## **RISE OF THE RULING CLASS**

Those considered the more spiritually advanced believers ascended in influence and power as the ranks of congregants swelled. Their rise fostered the emergence of the clergy class. The remaining congregation, or laity, soon was relegated to being merely the “children” of the church, while the clergy labeled themselves as the church.

In the Apostles’ day, church leaders were elected on a regular basis by their congregations. (Acts 14:23; II Cor. 8:19, *Young’s Literal Translation*) However,

over time, and as these leaders gained power, influence, and control, the practice of recurring elections gradually faded away. Once elected, they became leaders for life. With that grave mistake, the congregation's sovereignty was lost. The leaders, or clergy, became ascendant, and this had unfortunate results.

Edward Gibbon noted this gradual change in his classic work, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. "A regard for the public tranquillity, which would so frequently have been interrupted by annual or by occasional elections, induced the primitive Christians to constitute an honorable and perpetual magistracy, and to choose one of the wisest and most holy among their presbyters to execute, during his life, the duties of their ecclesiastical governor. It was under these circumstances that the lofty title of Bishop began to raise itself above the humble appellation of Presbyter; and while the latter remained the most natural distinction for the members of every Christian senate, the former was appropriated to the dignity of its new president."

Among these bishops there was vying for power as to who would be the greatest. This was settled over centuries of Christian history. Eventually one bishop stood supreme above all others. He would be designated the father of the church and would wield ultimate authority. At first, motives which sought the common good of the church were possibly behind this rise to power. However, the frailty of humanity soon manifested itself. The corrupting influence of power facilitated the rise of human reasoning and traditions of men over the authority of Scripture and the rights of all believers.

The Book of Revelation provides a prophetic perspective on the eventual rise of the clergy class. Two churches are contrasted in the second chapter, Ephesus and Pergamos. The Ephesian church was praised, "This thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." The church at Pergamos was rebuked, "So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate." (Rev. 2:6,15) Various opinions have been given as to what constituted the "doctrine of the Nicolaitans," but the best explanation comes from the very name itself. Nicolaitans, in the original Greek, means "victory over the people." The church at Ephesus resisted efforts to empower a superior spiritual ruling class, but Pergamos succumbed. The principle that authority resided within the church congregation was not held with integrity.

## **POWER STRUGGLES VERSUS HUMILITY**

The struggle for power is as old as the human family. The Bible tells us that it began when Satan deceived Eve. "That old serpent" sought to usurp God's earthly dominion to have it for his own, and he would stop at nothing to get it. (Rev. 20:2) Through lies and murder the Devil got what he wanted, but God only permitted it for a specific time and purpose. Through the redemptive work of Christ, the kingdom will be returned to the Heavenly Father. —I Cor. 15:24-26

Similarly, noble men are not immune to the intoxicating lure of power. The apostles enjoyed great intimacy with our Lord Jesus. We recall the scene when Jesus went to Capernaum with his beloved disciples. As on previous occasions, they had argued

with one another as to which of them would the greatest in the Lord's kingdom. In this, the weakness and frailty of their fallen humanity was made evident. They were trying to position themselves to take advantage of this marvelous new opportunity—a chief position in Jesus' administration. They imagined the power and prestige that they soon would have as rulers sitting "on twelve thrones."—Matt. 19:28

Jesus gently corrected them, showing them the flaw in their thinking. "They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, What were you discussing on the way? But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:33-35, *NASB*) This lesson is still applicable today. Those who would serve the Lord's people effectively must hold tenaciously to this principle. Any who would be great in God's eyes must become a humble servant. "For God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."—I Pet. 5:5, *NASB*

On his last night on earth, during the solemn occasion of his last supper, Jesus imparted a great lesson on humility. He, the one who had descended from heaven, stooped to wash the disciples' feet. "So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one

another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."—John 13:12-17, *NASB*

Surprisingly, moments after this lesson, the same argument began involving the disciples. "There arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest. And He said to them, The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called Benefactors. But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant." (Luke 22:24-26, *NASB*) How comforting to know that as Jesus was patient with them that night, so he is also with us.

## **A WAKE-UP CALL**

After centuries of escalating corruptions, reformers such as Hus, Wycliffe, Tyndale, Luther, Melanchthon, Zwingli, and Calvin sounded an alarm in the Christian world. Although not blessed with a full understanding of all the doctrines of Scripture, they nevertheless issued a wake-up call to certain important concepts. In essence they said, "Christians, we have fallen asleep, and have lost sight of who we are in God's eyes. If truly dedicated to God, we are all members of a priesthood just as the Scriptures tell us." The impact of that concept was revolutionary. Christians did not need any earthly intermediary or any in heaven, save for Christ alone, in order to approach God. Sweet are

the words of Apostle Paul in this regard: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”—Rom. 5:1,2

The Apostle John emphatically points out our relationship with God: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.” (I John 1:3,4) Indeed, our joy is made full by personal fellowship with our Heavenly Father and his Son Jesus Christ.

## **OUR MINISTRY**

With the wonderful realization that we are part of a priesthood comes the sense of duty and privilege to fulfill that ministry. As noted earlier, our mission is to show forth God’s praises. We have come to know of his great love. We are awed by his wisdom, justice and power. By virtue of our closeness with God we know, more than any others in this world, of his mercy, loving-kindness and patience. Paul provides direction in the performance of our priestly duties, which is to sing of the praises of God. He calls it “the ministry of reconciliation.”

“Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, ... and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf



of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (II Cor. 5:18-20 NASB) The last verse of this passage is easily misunderstood due to the phrase, “we beg you ... be reconciled to God.” The word “you” does not occur in the original Greek manuscript. Verse 18 shows that we are already reconciled to God. Thus, in verse 20, we are not the ones who are encouraged to be reconciled to God. Rather, it is all mankind to whom this is addressed. In other words, we, as Christ’s ambassadors, beseech mankind “on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

The *Weymouth New Testament* translation makes the meaning of Paul’s words beautifully clear, “All this is from God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and has appointed us to serve in the ministry of reconciliation. We are to tell how God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not charging men’s transgressions to their account, and that He has entrusted to us the Message of this reconciliation. On Christ’s behalf therefore we come as ambassadors, God, as it were, making entreaty through our lips: we, on Christ’s behalf, beseech men to be reconciled to God.”

Taking this perspective of our mission as a priesthood is very important and relevant to us. The world is increasingly secular, agnostic, and even atheistic. Many are turning their backs on God and Christianity because they have been taught erroneous ideas. They hear only of a wrathful, vindictive, vain and unapproachable God. In addition, the Christian faith has been politicized and viewed as narrow, bigoted and judgmental. We know that these views are incorrect, however, when seen in the light of the true message and promises of the Scriptures.

The world is hungry for hope. They need the qualities of mercy and love. We know that God excels in these characteristics above all others, and he desires to reconcile with mankind. We have the right message and have been graciously given a mission. As a priesthood of all believers we can encourage others toward peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ. We spread the Gospel news as ambassadors of Christ and the coming kingdom, proclaiming, “Be reconciled to God,” knowing that this is his plan and purpose for the human family.

Reconciliation implies peace. Being a peacemaker is a privilege that our Lord associated with a great reward. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matt. 5:9, *NASB*) Being a peacemaker is challenging, but it is also a powerful confirmation of our ministry. As part of this priesthood, we must practice peacemaking, even with our enemies—especially with our enemies. “You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”—vss. 43-48, *NASB*

If we desire to ultimately be sons of God, and his priesthood throughout eternity, we must be peacemakers in the present. This is consistent with

our profession that we have God's spirit of wisdom. "The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." (James 3:17,18, *English Standard Version*) Let us, by God's grace, sow seeds of peace that will yield a fruitful harvest of righteousness.

## **FURTHER EVIDENCE OF OUR PRIESTLY MINISTRY**

Hypocrisy is a charge commonly leveled at Christians. In many cases the accusation is appropriate. If we have true and honest hearts, however, we will not profess to be perfect, but claim only forgiveness by our merciful God. We each make foolish mistakes and find ourselves doing things that we do not intend. Paul confessed this frailty in himself. (Rom. 7:14-25) Despite our weaknesses, we must walk discretely in the world, as "children of light."—Eph. 5:8

We must use the wisdom God has supplied and, being completely selfless, avert giving occasion to find fault with our ministry. "We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness; ... through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not

killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.” II Cor. 6:3-10, *ESV*

God has primarily called those who are weak, foolish and base to be his people. Some of the strong, wise and noble are called, but not many. Thus God has ensured that no human being may boast in his sight. (I Cor. 1:26-31) In harmony with the humility of God’s priesthood is their denial of self-sufficiency. “Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. ... We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. ... Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s Word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.” (II Cor. 3:5,6,18; 4:1,2, *ESV*) While denying self-sufficiency is looked upon as a weakness in this world, we recognize it as a strength.

## **ORDER WITHIN THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS**

Though all fully dedicated believers constitute a priesthood, it is not to result in chaos at church meetings. “All things should be done decently and in order.” (I Cor. 14:40, *ESV*) Guidelines were given to the Early Church to establish proper order and

to facilitate spiritual growth and cooperation among Christians. Thus, some amongst the Lord's followers were selected by their various congregations to be "bishops" ["overseers," *Thayer's Greek Definitions*].

The qualifications for such leaders were stringent but necessary for the integrity of the church. "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." (I Tim. 3:2-7) It is a matter of historical record that bishops—overseers—were elected by the vote of the entire congregation annually. Some Christian fellowships still follow this practice and find it a blessing.

## **PRIESTS OF GOD**

In his introduction to the Book of Revelation, we note that John addresses it to the seven churches in Asia, not to the elders or a class of clergy. After his personal salutation to the body of believers in the church congregations, John bids them greetings from "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to him be the glory and the

dominion forever and ever.” (Rev. 1:5,6, *NASB*) We read further in Revelation, “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.” “Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; ... they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.”—Rev. 5:10; 20:6, *NASB*

There is to be an earthly kingdom. Jesus and his associated priesthood will reign over earth for a thousand years. Mankind will be blessed in a manner and to a degree that cannot now be imagined. That kingdom will be full of peace, enlightenment, love, joy, security, kindness, and justice. Its rulers will be Jesus and his “royal priesthood” of faithful followers. Their influence will be pervasive in the earth. These, who humbled themselves and made service to others a lifelong commitment, will tenderly restore mankind to their Creator. This will be the pinnacle accomplishment of their “ministry of reconciliation,” the great work of the Priesthood of All Believers. ■