

# The Priesthood of All Believers

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***Nina Rubin was a Baptist priest. A Baptist priest?  
Isn't that an oxymoron? Baptists don't have priests, do they?***

Actually, Baptists have millions of priests, and Nina was one of them. When underprivileged children in our town had no preschool program, she organized volunteers to provide one. She worked to make a home for wayward girls nearby and then grieved when they went to church in another town because they did not feel comfortable in the churches in our town.

I complained about standing in a grocery line with my 39-cent can of pumpkin to make my pie, while the lady in front of me bought a \$2.49 pie with food stamps. Nina patiently explained to me that the lady perhaps could not read a recipe, or had no measuring utensils, or could not get her oven to work. How lucky Nina said I was because I knew how to make my pie and had the materials to do so. Nina “priested” the underprivileged and the overprivileged in our community. She surely priested me.

Isn't “priest” a noun? It is. But in a real sense, it is also a verb.

What does “the priesthood of all believers” mean anyway? Why is this idea so important to Baptists, and where did they get it? Consider these answers:

- Baptists believe the concept is biblically rooted.
- Baptists, from our earliest days, have claimed it to be a crucial component for a vital church.
- Baptists affirm a universal ministry, insisting that all believers are called to be priests.
- The priesthood of all believers underscores for Baptists the conviction that ministry is at the center of Christian discipleship.

## **The Biblical Way**

Can you imagine how it must feel to be a slave? No one in society is lower than a slave. If all of your family had been slaves for 400 years, you would be slave to the core. Can you imagine how it must feel to suddenly be a free person? That is whiplash. But more whiplash is coming. Shortly after you escape slavery, you are told you are a priestly people. That's what happened to the Hebrew people.

A mere three months after Moses led the Hebrew people out of the pit of slavery, God told them they would be God's priestly kingdom (Exod. 19:6). From slaves to priests almost overnight? Moving from slavery to priesthood so quickly is a sharp religious and cultural whiplash. God did not say that only a few of God's people would be priests; God said the entire community would be a priestly kingdom.

Over the next 1,300 years or so, certain people did serve the nation officially as priests. But God clearly saw the nation as a holy and priestly nation. The mission of God's people was to be priests to those around them and to each other. As the people of God, they simply could not leave the responsibilities of being holy to someone who had the title of priest. God called them, all of them, out of Egypt to be a holy and priestly nation (Exod. 19:4-6). Every person was called to be priestly and holy.

Soon, certain persons began serving as priests for the nation. For centuries, priests were the representatives of the people before God. The priests offered sacrifices to God for the people. Only the priests went

behind the curtain into the most sacred place—the holy of holies. Priests as mediators between the people and God became the Old Testament way.

Then Jesus came along and began to minister to all kinds of people in diverse ways. When Jesus gave his life for our sins, the curtain between people and God was torn wide open (Matt. 27:51). Now, all believers have access to the holy God. No curtain separates the people from God. No longer do people need a priest to represent them before God. Everyone can go to God directly (Eph. 2:17-18). Priesthood changed. Some people understood the significance of the change, but some did not.

Peter got it. He wrote to Christians who were being persecuted in Asia Minor, reminding them they were to be obedient to Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:1). He then told them how to obey. In the course of instructing them in obedient living, he said, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you might proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you . . .” (1 Pet. 2:9, NRSV). All believers are called to be priestly and holy. Why? So that others will know the work of God.

Priestly deeds are not limited by gender, age, or social status. Peter reminded the crowd at Pentecost that God would pour out his Spirit on men and women, young and old, slave and free (Acts 2:17-18). God’s gifts are not confined to a particular group within Christianity. Everyone must use their individual gifts for God’s work and for God’s glory.

Because Jesus came, died, and was resurrected, priesthood changed. Believers no longer need to have a priest; they are priests themselves. Hierarchy no longer exists; all are equal. Each believer as a responsible priest is the New Testament way.

So, what does being a priest mean? Being a priest is not an office; it is a function. We are priests because we have chosen to be disciples of Christ. Whatever our vocation or hobbies or responsibilities, we are priests. Whatever we choose to do with our lives, we cannot escape the fact that as children of God we are called to be priests.

Cyril Eastwood says that the priesthood of all believers is “a spiritual privilege, a moral obligation, and a

personal vocation.”<sup>21</sup> The privilege is access to God. The obligation is to the church which teaches priesthood. The vocation is the arena where priests serve. Being a priest is both a gift and a demand.

Being a priest involves individual and community responsibilities. First, I am a priest as an individual. I am my own priest. I have direct access to God. I can go to God directly in prayer. I can read the Scripture for myself and ask God’s guidance in understanding it. I must seek the wisdom and teaching of others, but I can also search for the meaning with the Spirit’s guidance by myself. I am responsible before God for my behavior and my beliefs. I cannot make someone else responsible for my relationship or lack of relationship with God.

Second, being a priest means that each believer is responsible for using God-given gifts in ways that will serve the community. In the New Testament, gifts are discussed in four separate passages: Romans 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12–14; Ephesians 4:1–16; and 1 Peter 4:7–11. These passages claim that the Spirit gives each person a gift and that the gifts are different. Why does every Christian have gifts? To use for the good of the community. Each person’s gift is needed. Many different gifts are needed. Just as Jesus ministered to a variety of people in diverse ways, his followers are expected to use their diverse gifts to minister to the variety of people in their world. By doing so, Christians reflect the character of God.

Baptists take the concept of the priesthood of believers seriously, because the Bible takes the idea seriously. Both the Old Testament and New Testaments call God’s people to minister. The call is not to hire someone to do ministry for us, but a call for every believer to do ministry. The demand of priesthood is that all believers use their gifts to minister to others.

## **The Baptist Way**

As Christianity grew over the centuries, the hierarchical role of priests began to reassert itself. A special priesthood, rather than a universal priesthood, became the approved way for people to reach God.

About 500 years ago, Martin Luther, a devout Roman Catholic monk, became convinced that the New

Testament taught that all believers were priests. According to Luther, “Christ has made it possible for us . . . to be . . . his fellow priests.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Luther insisted that all individuals should be able to read the Bible on their own and to pray to God directly. No one could stand between a person and God. This faithful German monk rediscovered the biblical emphasis that all Christians have equal access to God. Moreover, Luther said, all Christians have the responsibility for their own relationship with God. No one could relate to God for another. Following Luther, the priesthood of all believers began to be reemphasized among some Christians.

About 400 years ago, Baptists emerged as a branch of Christianity. Early Baptist leaders agreed wholeheartedly with Luther. John Smyth and Thomas Helwys led a group of people in England to separate from the Church of England because they wanted to have a voice in the life of their church. The group eventually became the first Baptist church. Smyth insisted that the church is a “kingly priesthood” and that the saints (or Christians) are “kings and priests.”<sup>3</sup> Helwys declared that a person’s religion is between God and that person.<sup>4</sup>

John Smyth and Thomas Helwys launched Baptist life on the principle that priesthood is shared by all Christians, not relegated to a few. From their earliest days, Baptists had no office of priest. From the beginning of Baptist life, every person was considered a priest.

Individuals continued to be of primary significance in Baptist life. One of the earliest Baptist confessions of faith, the 1644 London Confession, stated: “And all his servants are called . . . to bring their gifts God has given them . . . according to the effectuall [sic] working of every part” of the church. The 1677 Second London Confession affirmed that all members are bound to further the good of the church by exercising their gifts to promote communion, love, and edification in the community of faith.<sup>5</sup>

Baptists in America addressed the same priority in the 1833 New Hampshire Confession. This statement defined the church as a body of baptized believers who exercised “the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word.”<sup>6</sup> Southern Baptists used similar

language when they adopted the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* describing the church as a congregation of baptized believers “exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word.”<sup>7</sup>

Baptist seminary professor E.Y. Mullins’s distinctive work, *The Axioms of Religion*, stressed the importance of the doctrine of soul competency. Soul competency is not self-sufficiency; it is competency under God. The competency comes from the Spirit of Christ in that person. One’s religion is a very personal relationship—between that soul and God. No one intervenes. One person cannot repent, accept salvation, or obey for another person.

The individual’s direct access to God could not be more clearly stated than in Mullins’ warning: “Whenever a church interposes between the child and the Father, through sacrament, through human priesthood or hierarchy, through centralized government, through authoritative oligarchies of any kind in spiritual affairs, it ceases to conform to the kingdom of God, and becomes a juvenile court or orphanage instead.”<sup>8</sup> Mullins’ words are thought-provoking. Orphanages are places for children with no parents. When a person’s access to God is denied, that person becomes an orphan separated from the Father.

One person or group simply cannot claim more spiritual privilege than another. There are no spiritual classes when relating to God. All believers are children of God. Of course, churches will have ministers or officials to perform certain duties, but they are not the masters of the life and faith of other believers.

Mullins insisted that the autonomy of the believer is an intrinsic part of grace. The personal relationship with God is his grace to us. Because each believer has a personal relationship with God, believers work together in the community of church as brothers and sisters, not as masters and servants.

Baptists believe in the priesthood of each believer because we believe that God creates competent persons. We believe that God gives every believer the skills and abilities to be priest both for self and for one another. George W. Truett, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, speaking at the Baptist World Alliance in 1939, reminded Baptists from around the

world of the importance of this principle. In fact, Truett said this principle was the keystone truth for Baptists. All other Baptist beliefs relate to this one idea—that the individual is competent to handle a personal relationship with God without someone to mediate. Truett based his belief on the New Testament, which, he said, put “supreme emphasis” on the importance of the individual.<sup>9</sup>

For Baptists, being our own priests means that we are responsible only to God. We are not accountable to another person, to a creed or confession, to a council or convention, or to any text other than Scripture. Our only sovereign is God. No other authority comes between us and God. We are accountable for being guided by God’s Spirit.

The priesthood of all believers is a core principle of Baptist doctrine. We insist that:

- Each person can interpret Scripture as an individual.
- Only believers should be baptized.
- Each church can govern itself.
- All of our connections to local, regional, state, and national bodies are voluntary.
- Every person has a right to religious liberty.

All of these basic beliefs of Baptists underscore our conviction that each person is competent in religious matters and that each believer is a priest.

### **“All” Are Priests?**

We sat in a circle. All of us shared information about ourselves and our churches. I don’t remember the young man’s name, but I remember well his face and his story: “No one is ordained in our church. The pastor is not. The deacons are not. We see all our gifts as important. No one’s gift is more important than another. So why give some gifts more recognition than others? One person has the gift of preaching, and he preaches for us. But all of us have important gifts and must be responsible for using them in our community of faith.”

I sat stunned. If that is not church, I do not know what church is. Every person in that congregation was

a priest, each taking responsibility for some part of the mission of the faith community. Apparently, that congregation read the letters to the Corinthians and Ephesians and took them seriously.

Churches are congregations of priests. Having many priests means bringing varied gifts to the faith community. People who preach well are crucial to the life of the church. So are people who teach, cook, sweep, sing, give rides to the elderly, rake leaves for the shut-ins, keep the babies, and many folks who priest others by doing what they know how to do. Aren’t we glad that all believers aren’t preaching priests? Aren’t we glad that we are a kingdom of priests, sharing a variety of gifts?

Sometimes, we would rather hire someone to do our priesting so that we don’t have to do it. When the demands of priesthood become too great, we hear people say, “let’s hire another staff member.” Perhaps another staff person is needed, but the church needs to take a close look at the need. Is the staff addition an effort to excuse church members from their priestly responsibilities?

Sometimes, people give away their responsibilities as priests. A know-it-all or do-it-all person comes into the church, claiming ultimate knowledge. Since that person seems eager to assume authority, other priests in the church let that person take charge. They give away their priestly duties and then frequently complain when that person begins to “run” the church. Responsible believers do not see priesthood as a proxy they can contract out or give away.

A local church is merely the launching pad for priests. Much of the work of priests is done outside of the church walls. Priests are priests everywhere, wherever their daily lives take them. Priests are intentional about going to minister in the places where they are needed. How tragic it would be if believers huddled within the church walls all the time, using the church as their cocoon to shelter them from the needs of their community.

All believers are priests in two ways. Being a priest is an individual commitment and a community commitment. For an individual, priesthood is personal. It is about a person’s relationship with God. No person



can interfere with that relationship. Every individual must keep an up-to-date relationship with God through Bible study, prayer, and personal commitment.

Being a priest is also a community endeavor. Priests need to worship together, plan together, work together, support one another, and participate in the business of their church. Believers must commit themselves to minister through the community of priests. Community nurtures the individuals for ministry. In community, people work together, not alone. In community, individuals work as equals realizing the strength of combining personal gifts of ministry. We work as individual priests through a community of priests.

### **Ministering as Priests**

In the middle of a declining community, a large congregation worships. The members spent a million dollars on a family life center. Two blocks away is a large public housing development. What a ministry the new center could provide for that largely unreached population. The folks in those apartments need priests. Who will be priests to them?

Another congregation sits in a declining neighborhood in another city. A sign in front of the building reads: “\_\_\_\_\_ meets here.” The church is a group of priests ministering in the community; it is not a building. The priests merely use the building as a meeting place to worship and to plan for and launch ministry. The people in that declining community know who the priests are because they minister to them in many ways.

The priesthood of all believers calls each Christian to minister as an individual and in community. “The church is the church only when it exists for others,” concluded Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>10</sup>



# Notes & Questions for Discussion

## Notes

1. Cyril Eastwood, *The Priesthood of All Believers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1962), 80.
2. Martin Luther, *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 290.
3. John Smyth, “Differences of the Churches of the Separation,” in H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 15.
4. Thomas Helwys, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” in McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 72.
5. William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 166, 285-89.
6. *Ibid.*, 365.
7. Annual, Southern Baptist Convention, 1925, 73.
8. E.Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1908), 39.
9. George W. Truett, “The Baptist Message and Mission for the World Today,” in Walter B. Shurden, ed., *The Life of Baptists in the Life of the World* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985), 113.
10. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 382.

## Questions for Discussion

11. What is the biblical basis for the priesthood of all believers?
12. Why did early Baptists view this principle as crucial?
13. Why is the priesthood of all believers seen as a keystone belief of Baptists?
14. Why is “all” significant to the concept of the priesthood of all believers?
15. What is the difference between being a priest as an individual and being a priest in community?

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