

Leadership Development Emerging Leader Baptist Polity Essay Award

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May 15, 2019

The Priesthood of all believers - besides anything else, it sounds cool. But, for anything to truly help local church ministry, it needs to be understood by the local church. It is not enough for the leadership to understand the significance and see the benefit of something. The priesthood of all believers is foundational to the identity of followers of Jesus part of a local church community. As Paul explains, each Christian may have specific gifts or abilities that God has given them (1 Corinthians 12:4-12), but the priesthood of all believers is a universal and unifying characteristic of believers that affects how they relate to each other and to God.

According to the CBAC, the priesthood of all believers is defined as follows:

“Baptists hold that ALL believers share as equals in the church, and, in turn, have a priestly role toward each other. Every member is called to be a minister. Differences in education, wealth, gender and so on do not disqualify a person from service or from serving God through ministry to others.”<sup>1</sup>

In some ways, the effort for equality and fairness has been successful, and in other areas, there is still improvement that needs to be made. Because of how inclusive much of our society and Christian community is, this polity item may seem unnecessary or like an obvious assumption, but it has had significant historical distinction and is still deeply important to Christian faith and practice today.

### **Historic Definition**

The priesthood of all believers is essentially described by its name as being a priesthood made up of all believers in Jesus. But though it is in some ways self explanatory, this definition is significant because it provides a contrast to two other possible understandings of the priesthood. The first is the priesthood that came through the line of Aaron. This priesthood was entered into by birth, and not through belief, therefor making it exclusive to Aaron’s descendants, and not something that just anyone could be a part of, even if one had a sincere desire to serve in that manner (Hebrews 7:16).

The second understanding of the priesthood that the priesthood of all believers provides a contrast for is that which the reformers sought to distance themselves from during the reformation. The reformers sought to bring back an understanding of individual Christian ability to be ministers of the new covenant and active participants in the church. This contrasted with the understanding of the Roman Catholic Church which set only some men apart as priests.

The priesthood of all believers is one that anyone can enter into through belief in Jesus regardless of the person’s heritage, social status, or gender. The when the person believes and becomes a priest, they have the same access to God as any other believer through Jesus and require no other priest or mediator. The believer is also able to serve and be a minister of the new covenant that God wants everyone to take part in.

### **Biblical Rooting**

In 1 Peter 2:5-9, Peter describes the identity of those who now believe in Jesus and the honour that they have in believing. Peter calls believers “living stones... being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood” and “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada, ‘Baptist Distinctives’, September 2019.

people for his own possession” (1 Peter 2:5, 9). It is from these two passages that the idea of the priesthood of all believers comes primarily, and there are references made in places like Hebrews 13:15-16 to spiritual sacrifices that presumably the New Testament priest believer would make in place of the Old Testament physical sacrifices now that Jesus has made the final sacrifice for sin. These spiritual sacrifices include sacrifices of praise and sacrifices of doing good and sharing what one has. In the 1 Peter 2 passage, Peter also talks about making spiritual sacrifices as with the ultimate purpose “that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

I feel that there is also somewhat of an element of prophecy in an account from Numbers 11:26-29 where Moses says he wished that everyone were a prophet like him when Joshua asked him to stop two men from prophesying in the camp of Israel. The prophetic sentiment is that some day all people will be given the opportunity through faith in Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit to have the same kind of intimate access to God that the priests and prophets had. Another potential foreshadowing of the priesthood of all believers is the promise that God makes to the people of Israel in Exodus 19:5-6. God promises that if Israel was obedient to him, they would become to him a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, which is the same kind of language that Peter uses in reference to believers now – with obedience being that of belief in Jesus.

### **Implications for Current Ministry**

If the priesthood of all believers is clearly taught and explained, it can be an impacting concept for each local church member to understand, because it ties their experience, expression of faith and relationship with God back to the Old Testament and the lives that the Israelite people lived in relationship to God. It allows the church now to see in one aspect how it is (and is continually becoming through sanctification) the full expression of what God desired Israel to be.

The priesthood of all believers is also extremely important for each member to understand, because it means that every individual has personal access to God, and the ability to serve in his church. With this awesome and encouraging privilege also comes the responsibility to be an active participant in their local church family. No one can exclude another as unworthy to serve, because all are priests, but neither can someone stand back and refuse to participate as if service to God and others in his name is only for a special group.

Understanding that all are priests serves as a reminder to church leadership that they are not the only ones able to serve and they are not by default more connected to God. Their entire congregation is made up of priests given the ability to hear from God and serve.

With all this in mind, the final implication for ministry is that in 1 Peter 2:4 Peter writes “as you come to him”. The priesthood of all believers is significant for the ministry of the church because it is an invitation for all people no matter who they are, regardless of social standing, gender, education, etc... to come to God personally and be bestowed a significant responsibility and privilege to be one of God's agents in the world, one of God's priests.