
To Whom Does the Priesthood of the Believer Pertain?

There are differences of understanding concerning to whom the priesthood of the believer pertains. Some say that the priesthood of the believer is with reference to every believer without exception. Others say that the priesthood of the believer concerns only those that will come into the fellowship of a NT church. Which is it? Considering only these two views the cause for the difference appears to be the result of at least three things.

1. One's bias when reading ancient witnesses concerning the priesthood of the believer.
2. One's view of the NT epistles; to whom these epistles written.
3. How one defines the term '*saints*.'

Now, please understand that I could be wrong. I may have misled you dear saints. But this is not a view that was contrived overnight. This has been developing over years of study. If I am wrong all I ask for is your patience and prayers that the Lord might help me to understand this correctly. Look, those on both sides of this issue take the priesthood of the believer very, very seriously. This doctrine sets the proper order for *the churches*. Rather than Nicolaitanism, which divides the church into clergy/laity (a priesthood which mediates in behalf of the laity to God, to Mary, to Jesus, to the saints, etc.) the church is wholly comprised of believer-priests. Therefore the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer, when properly understood, serves as a primary means for distinguishing the *true faith of Christ* from other heretical, religious organizations. So, when we read of *brethren in the past* that wrote concerning the priesthood of the believer, in the main, they were writing in opposition to the heresy that was spreading throughout Christendom. But even the good which they wrote of the believer-priest can be misunderstood.

First, reading ancient witnesses with bias

One of the problems that arises when referring to ancient testimonies in true church history regarding the priesthood of the believers is context. We unknowingly bring bias to the text. No one is free of this. We all read good, ancient, true church testimonies to this and that truth, but we are very prone to reading in a prejudices light. I can read a certain remark and understand it one

way, and another brother can read the same and understand it another way. And so, there is an additional division within the ranks of *SOUND* Baptist brethren and churches. I'll quote this for an example.

'Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165), the Christian apologist, writing his Dialogue with Trypho, asserted the priesthood of believers. Neander cites his writings thusly:

'Instead of any reference to a particular priesthood we find the mention of the universal Priesthood...He says, 'God receives sacrifices from no one unless through his priests: but all Christians when purified from their sins are the true priestly generation'.
Sacerdotalism and the Baptists, Milburn Cockrell, p.14.

And there are a number of these kinds of remarks that we can mine out and share with others. But have we overlaid a bias upon the remark? In those days there was not the explosion of various religions, and I don't understand that there was then the explosion of *believers at large*, believers that never come into the fellowship of a church. Certainly, there were some. (cf. Heb.10.25, *as the manner of some is*)

Note: The Scriptures simply do not address what could be called '*believers at large*,' unassociated believers, believers that will not come into the fellowship of one of the Lord's NT churches. For example, what became of the thousands of professing believers that followed Christ here and there during His earthly ministry? Some of whom were chief rulers of Israel. (cf. Jn.2.23; 8.30; 10.42; 12.42) The Scriptures do not say. But after Christ's ascension to the right hand of the Father a mere 120 gathered together in the upper room. (cf. Ac.1.14) Of those which believed in Christ that did not continue with Christ they are *cast forth, wither* and men gather them to be burned. (cf. Jn.15.6) Such verbiage leads me to think they though saved, their lives are become fruitless, wasted. Certainly, they are saved, but as Paul wrote, *yet so as by fire*. (1Co.3.15) Nothing saved for Christ. Their 'treasure-box' in heaven is empty. (cf. Mt.6.20; 19.21) Of these that will not glorify God by serving Christ in His church nothing more needs to be said? What more needs to be told them that they don't already know? God's word pertains to the faithful saints of the churches of Jesus Christ.

So that when I read ancient statements that tell of the priesthood of all believers it could be that the writer only knew of believers or had in mind those which came into the NT church. I think this is the context in which we should understand these statements. Then it was not like today, it was quite unusual for a believer to fail to serve the Lord in His church. The remarks of the ancient brethren were not made to distinguish this believer from another believer. Their statements were made stand against the growing error of *priestcraft* that was become popular in Christendom then. This priestcraft heresy would grow into what will be called Catholicism. Today however we must define every term: *believer, disciple, Christian* and *saint*. For centuries the remarks surrounding the priesthood of the believer was to counter the terrible error of Catholicism.

Second, the view of the NT epistles

By view of the NT epistles, again we deal with context. Our view of these letters affects so much. It affects how we understand the nature of the church, her doctrines, her work, and yes, the priesthood of the believer.

If we do not understand that ALL the NT letters were written to churches or people that were associated to a church, it will influence what we perceive the priesthood of the believer to be. In my estimation, the weight of the argument for the priesthood of the believer, whether it is every believer without exception or every believer that will come into a NT church stand or falls here. Evidently many good brethren and churches are of the mind that epistles such as Romans, Hebrews and I & II Peter are church letters. This must necessarily cause a rift between brethren that are of the mind that ALL the epistles are church letters. Now, let me briefly demonstrate that ALL the epistles are church letters.

Romans is a letter written with AT LEAST 3 churches in mind. (Ro.16.2, commanded them, a major church in Roman to receive Phebe; Ro.16.3-5, acknowledging the church meeting in Aquila & Prisca's house; Rom16.15, the saints meeting with Philologus).

Hebrews is a letter written to early churches that were predominately, if not wholly Jewish. Paul commanded them not to forsake the assembling of themselves together. (He.10.25) Paul assumes that they are assembling. Why? Because it is what churches do. They cannot forsake assembling themselves

together if they were not first assembling. That the letter is written to NT churches is clear.

Heb 3:1 Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus;

...

6 But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.

The two letters that Peter wrote were addressed to churches that were predominately of a Gentile congregation. (cf. 1Pe.4.3) These churches were scattered in several parts of the country that is presently known as Turkey. How do I know that he wrote to churches? In 1Pe.5.1-4 Peter instructs the 'elders, pastors' that are AMONG them.

1Pe 5:1 The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed:

2 Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight [thereof], not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;

3 Neither as being lords over [God's] heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.

4 And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

Believers at large don't have pastors, but churches do. Peter's second letter was written to the same people.

2Pe 3:1 This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in [both] which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance ...

Why is this important? Because these church epistles are the ones that contain vital information about the priesthood of the believer.

1Pe 2:9 But ye [are] a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light ...

The Book of Revelation is a church letter. It was written to the seven churches of Asia. And in this John writes that some are kings and priests of God.

*Re.1.5 And from Jesus Christ, [who is] the faithful witness, [and] the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood,
6 And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him [be] glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.*

*Re.5.9 And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;
10 And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.*

Like the love of Christ, it would not be denied that he loves all His sheep, but he had a special love for the sheep within the context of the little flocks, His churches.

Eph.5.25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

These things said, I am led to conclude that the priesthood of the believer is contained within the context of the Lord's NT church.

And third, our view of the term *saints*

The term '*saints*' always refers to those that are in one of the Lord's true churches. It means 'holy ones.' This noun is found in 61 verses in the NT. But for about three of those texts, the other 56 or 57 ALWAYS has reference to the baptized, believing, church-related disciples of Jesus Christ. That is incontrovertible. This ought to cause us to stop and take another look at what are thinking of God's word, and God's special people, and of their special service to the Lord as functioning members of Christ's church. Here, in the church, the saints aren't mediating for others. Here they are offering spiritual sacrifices. And what are those sacrifices? They are prayers, praises, worship, giving of thanks, fellowship around in the word of God, and the whole service of Christ. It is improper for

believers outside of the context of the Lord's NT think that they may render acceptable spiritual service to God when they reject coming into the place of the Spirit's holy abode, in the church. For every believer, The CHURCH OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IS THE ONLY ORDAINED PLACE FOR SPIRITUAL SERVICE, just as the Aaronic priesthood had an ordained place to perform their sacrifices and various services to the LORD. The sons of Aaron were not allowed of the LORD to offer at any altar, or serve at any table, or light any lamp stand, or burn incense on any altar of incense. They were to keep themselves around Christ, the figure of the Tabernacle. The church of the Lord Jesus is where God has chosen to receive the glory by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. (Eph.3.21)

Saints are holy ones, ones that are separated to God for holy service. They are faithful. They are overcomers.

Finally, the priesthood of the believer is an official function of the believers which come into the churches serve. Notice that Christ has made *us* kings and priests. These are offices. Every child of God that will follow Christ in His church enters into the kingly and priestly function.

Re.1.6 And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him [be] glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Re.5.10 And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.

It is my understanding that the idea of a priesthood comprised of every believer without exception is beyond what the Bible teaches. It short-circuits the program which God has for His people. It would be like saying that every Israelite was allowed to serve in the Aaronic priesthood, which is out of the question. Christ is certainly High Priest to every believer. It is not that such an understanding of the priesthood as I propose here is a bar to anyone that would approach unto God's throne of grace. The things we have said here do not concern soteriology, but ecclesiology. The elect shall be saved; the sheep shall be found. And once saved, once found, they may all come into the service of Christ, though few will. The teaching of the priesthood of the believer bars no one from serving Christ after the due order. The fact is the believer bars himself from the spiritual exercises of

the priesthood when he refuses to identify with Christ by becoming a faithful member of one of Lord's NT churches.

OT priests performed the services around the tabernacle. (cf. Lev.17.1-5) And later they served in the Temple. The church is parallel to the Temple. (cf. 1Co.3.15-17; 2Co.6.14-18; Eph.2.21) In this place these kings and priests of God serve Him until Christ returns.

Prayerfully consider the things I've tried to share today. Yes, there are heretical organizations and people that have abused this doctrine. But if we are Christ's, and love Him, His church, and his people must contend for the faith once for all delivered TO THE SAINTS. If we will not it is certain the devils will have a hey-day with it. I mean no offense to any of my dear brethren that are opposed to the things I've said. Craig A. Thurman