

## *Does It Matter?*

Reader, I have almost finished setting out what I believe to be the biblical doctrine of ‘the priesthood of all believers’. I fear my book has many shortcomings, but I must leave it as it is, hoping that, with all its failings, it may yet prove profitable.

You may wonder if it is necessary to look so closely into this subject, to make such a song and dance about it. Is it *that* important? What difference does it make? Have I been making a mountain out of a molehill?

A molehill? ‘The priesthood of believers’ a molehill? Whatever next! Is it important, indeed! It *is*! It is at the heart of the Christian life. But, as I said at the start, ‘the priesthood of all believers’ is a doctrine which has been sadly neglected and forgotten by many Christians. Oh yes, lip service has been paid to it. Many have been ready to repeat ‘the priesthood of all believers’ as some kind of slogan. But how little serious thought has been given to it in detail. It is, I might say, a phrase often repeated, but rarely realised. I am not alone in placing a high value on the doctrine. Cyril Eastwood:

There is both need and room for a thorough examination of the basis, meaning and development of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. It is time that the doctrine was taken out of the slogan category and set in its true context as an essential and determinative element in the theology of the church... The history of the Reformation, the history of Puritanism, and the history of the Evangelical Revival, are the story of the extent to which Christians have understood and applied the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.<sup>1</sup>

And as I have already said, those who do have some concept of it too often think of it in terms of an *individual* thing, a personal thing; that is to say, I can go directly to God for myself without an intermediary. Excellent, of course, and entirely proper; a fundamental biblical principle, without question.

But the priesthood of all believers has a large part to play in the *corporate* life of believers, the church. Eastwood again: ‘The truths

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<sup>1</sup> Eastwood ix, p241.

inherent in the doctrine should be incorporated in the worshipping life of the church'.<sup>2</sup> I would broaden this to 'the entire life of the church', unless 'worship' is defined as everything a believer engages in. As I have shown, a case can be argued from Scripture for it, something which is not always appreciated as it should be.

In casting this stone, I know I, too, live in this particular glass-house. To my confusion, alas, I have to confess that until I looked into the subject in the course of writing my original essay, I had an abysmal lack of understanding and appreciation of the priesthood of all believers. I, myself, was guilty of using the phrase as little more than a slogan, a form of words virtually without content, not stopping to think what I meant by it. I simply had not realised how important a matter it is, and how far-reaching it is in practical terms. And in producing this fuller version, I have come to see that it is a vital subject, and ought to have a far greater influence in the life of the Christian, and in his life with and among other believers, than it too often has. That is why I now publish this volume. I hope it might be of use to others.<sup>3</sup>

'The priesthood of all believers', then, is of huge importance and has far-reaching consequences.

Let me set out these consequences in nine ways. In enumerating these nine, there will be inevitable echoes of what I have said before. I know that in doing this I transgress the rules of proper editorial practice, but I make no apology for it. I want to be useful.

### ***1. 'The priesthood of believers' is a biblical principle***

In the first place, the doctrine we have been looking at is a biblical doctrine. That, on its own, should be more than enough to show its importance to the Christian. God has wasted no words in the Bible. He has not revealed any doctrine or principle that we can dismiss as unimportant. If we cannot see the relevance of any biblical

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<sup>2</sup> Eastwood p249.

<sup>3</sup> I am saying all this despite the fewness of the number of direct scriptural references to the subject, and the corresponding lack of arguments along the lines of: 'Because you are priests of the Lord, you should...'. I have tried to deal with both points, but I still recognise the objection.

doctrine, the fault is ours and we must put it right. Bible doctrines must be understood by Christians – and applied by them! The priesthood of all believers is no exception.

***2. ‘The priesthood of all believers’ reminds us that God is, that he must be worshipped, and that he can only be approached and worshipped by a priest***

The fact that God exists, and that he must be worshipped, is fundamental to our faith. Indeed, as I explained in ‘First Principles’, it is basic to the human condition. God rightly expects and deserves glory from all his creation. Scripture makes clear that God demands recognition and acknowledgement from mankind. Far more, he demands submission, obedience and worship. We can go further. God *desires* such worship, as he has made known to us through his Son (John 4:23). But he will only be worshipped in the way that he has revealed – and that is by the principle of ‘priesthood’.

I realise that men such as Noah and Abraham had dealings with God *before* the establishment of the levitical priesthood. May I remind you, reader, that in those same ‘First Principles’ I stressed this very fact. The point is, however, these men were acting as virtual priests themselves; they certainly offered sacrifice. And, although after the establishment of the Mosaic covenant, men such as David and Daniel prayed and worshipped God without always making formal use of levitical priests, those who had spiritual communion with God before the coming of Christ, had that communion under the new covenant, and, therefore, by virtue of the priesthood of Christ. ‘Priesthood’, I repeat, is essential.

And this is the crux of the matter. God will not allow or receive any worship, however sincere or well intentioned, if it is not in obedience to his word (John 4:24). There is such a thing as true worship, and there is such a thing as false worship. And God dismisses pagan worship as abominable, the worship of ‘demons’ (1 Cor. 10:19-22). Sincere it might be, even well-intentioned, but it is, nevertheless, an abomination to God. Sincerity is not enough.

With that ringing in our ears, it is a truism to say that we cannot allow mistakes in this matter. Muddle is a luxury we cannot afford.

The nature of true worship must be well understood and acted upon by all who profess to serve the living God. And this is precisely what the doctrine of ‘the priesthood of all believers’ deals with. If we wish to know how to come to God acceptably, this is the doctrine we have to grasp. Such is the measure of its importance. This is what it is about.

Priestly sacrifice is at the root of all acceptable worship of God; priestly sacrifice is its basis. God has revealed that he will only be worshipped in this way; he will receive the approaches only of those who come as priests bearing acceptable sacrifices. That, surely, as I have just argued, requires no proof as far as the Old Testament is concerned. It is self-evident; it is written plainly across the entire volume from Genesis to Malachi, both before and after the setting up of the old covenant. In both epochs, God could only be approached by means of acceptable sacrifices in the hands of a priest, and both had to be as appointed by him.

But the same is true of the New Testament. God does not suddenly change in between the two Testaments.<sup>4</sup> One of the last things that God said as he drew the Old Testament to a close, re-emphasises this very point: ‘I am the LORD, I do not change’ (Mal. 3:6). In particular, in that closing book of the Old Testament, God, through the prophet, addressed the priests, demanding reformation of their observance of the priesthood, insisting on his people’s return to Scripture and obedience to it. And he made sure that they all got the point. He had revealed his word, and he was *not* going to change his mind. *They* had to change *their* ways, and come back to his law. He was not going to tamper with it to come to terms with their sin: ‘I am the LORD, I do not change’. Men change; God does not. We are changeable; God is not.

‘I am the LORD, I do not change’. Very well. Just as in the Old Testament he demanded sacrificial worship and priestly service in obedience to his revealed will in Scripture, so he does in the New. And still he does today. We have seen that all God’s people are priests. God has elected, redeemed, called, justified and sanctified them to make them such, and he has revealed the nature of their sacrificial work in his word. Indeed, it is only those brought to

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<sup>4</sup> See my other works for the continuity/discontinuity debate.

saving faith, and so made priests, who can worship God in a way that is acceptable to him.

That being the case, we must come to terms with this ‘priesthood’. We must get a grip on it. It must get a grip on us. It is not something of secondary importance. It is vital. Nothing could be more important. How can we approach God? How can I be saved? Priesthood is at the heart of the answer; the priesthood of Christ, his person and work. Not only that. The nature of true worship and service is involved. And is that secondary? Now ‘priesthood’ is at the heart of that also. If we do not understand what is involved in ‘the priesthood of all believers’, we are attempting to worship God in the dark. There is no need of it. It is wrong to do it. God has made himself very clear on this matter, and it is a sin if we do not apply our mind to the Bible to find out what God is teaching us. Furthermore, it is our duty to study God’s word, and then put its doctrine into practice.

### ***3. ‘The priesthood of all believers’ destroys sacerdotalism***

Another very important consequence of the doctrine of ‘the priesthood of all believers’ is that it destroys the error of sacerdotalism. I make no apology for returning to it yet once more. Sacerdotalism is endemic. Sacerdotalism, as I have explained, is the delegation of our worship into the hands of others, who we feel are better able, more qualified, to carry it out for us. In such a system, worship is a task that is best left to a special class – priests. Called by various names they may be, but that is what they are – professional priests. Hence arose the distinction between the clergy and the laity. The clergy do the spiritual, while the laity are largely passive and have the spiritual done to and for them by the clergy.

This special class, this clergy, as I have stated, can be given various names. But call them by what names men will, disguise it as much as they like, such a class has only one real name – ‘priests’. John Milton, 350 years ago, spotted it with his ‘new presbyter – old priest writ large’. Sometimes such clerical men are quite openly called ‘priests’, and then the evil nonsense is easy to spot. But the error is present even when hidden by use of more acceptable names. Those in this clerical class are variously called

‘ministers’, ‘elders’ or ‘pastors’. But are these not biblical words? Yes, they are. But that does not prevent them from being mis-used. As they are, as I will argue more fully in a forthcoming work. The root of the trouble is that when we read these biblical words, time and again we read them through glasses tinted by 1500 years of Christendom. But we must not assume that Christendom’s view of ‘pastor’ and ‘minister’ is the biblical view. Whatever else it is, it most certainly is not that! And Christendom’s view can so easily drift into ‘clericalism’. It has, times without number. And it has not always ‘drifted’ into it; it has been ‘driven’ into it!

‘Clericalism? Too frequently, believers think of their ministers as those more qualified to worship than they are; they are better able to approach God. And too many believers seem to want to leave their worship – and more – in the hands of this special class. Moreover, too many men, who ought to know better, are willing to let themselves be called – even choose to be called, and try to defend being called – ‘reverend’ or some such. I know that howls of protest will arise on reading this. Nevertheless, I stand by my assertion. There is an inflated view of ‘the ministry’ today, and, chicken and egg, it has assumed a role, a status, a structure, never envisaged in the New Testament. Most believers cannot think of ‘ministry’ in any other way than a designated class of ordained men. In a word, clergy!

Such an attitude is on the high road to sacerdotalism. And sacerdotalism is far more widespread than many think. See my other works for examples of what I am talking about.

This error is nonsense, dangerous and sinful nonsense. All believers are priests. There is no such thing as a special class of acceptable or higher worshippers; nor anything like it. No class distinction exists among believers. No believer is more qualified to worship God than the rest. There is no clergy/laity split. The notion is an invention of the Fathers which was set in concrete by the Church of Rome. It was kept up by the Reformers, and it has not gone away. Still it pervades the thinking of most believers today.

And it stands in direct contradiction of a vital biblical principle; namely, that the spiritual worship and the sacrifice offered to God by every believer, even the weakest and newest believer, is as acceptable to him as the worship of the most advanced and most

mature believer. Any notion that, perhaps, some men are better qualified to worship and have more responsibility than others in this area is abominable to the Lord. Abominable, I repeat. Christians are not divided into two groups – professional worshippers or priests, and the rest. All believers are priests.

Allied to this is the objectionable, utterly wrong, practice adopted by some (even Reformed; perhaps, especially, Reformed) ministers using the aaronic priestly blessing as it stands (Num. 6:22-27) – with its repeated use of the priestly ‘you’ – when closing a service. Right it was, of course, under the old covenant, for a priest to bestow a blessing, *but not for us today under the new covenant*. None of us today can ‘bless’ another. Worse still is it, as I have witnessed, for a Reformed Baptist minister – who, incidentally, has the most decided anti-papist views, and certainly has not been guilty of hiding them under any bushel – to raise his arms above the congregation, *the palms of his hands facing us*, as he pronounces the words. He gave the distinct impression to more than one person that he thought he *was* blessing the congregation, not *asking* for a blessing upon us all – including himself. I know the man has been told of it (not by me!), but it has made no difference. He continues the practice. Nevertheless, it smacks of sacerdotalism; it is sacerdotalism. It is an abominable abuse.<sup>5</sup>

Do such men not fear they might be trespassing on Christ’s prerogative (Luke 24:50)? Or, worse, are they aping him? No man today has this right or power. If 2 Corinthians 13:14 is thought to justify it – though it needs proof that Paul was not simply *praying* there – it must not be forgotten that it was an *apostle* pronouncing the blessing. In any case, I do not think Paul was pronouncing a blessing. He was asking, praying for, wishing for, hoping for, the Corinthians to feel the sense of, the enjoyment of, the triune God’s blessing: ‘May’ – note the word – ‘May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all’ (NIV). Compare Romans 1:7; 15:13; 16:20,25-27; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 16:23; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3-5; 6:18,

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<sup>5</sup> Contrary to Spurgeon (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit...* 1871, Passmore & Alabaster, London, 1872, pp242-244). I think he was much closer to the truth of it a year later (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit...* 1872, Passmore & Alabaster, London, 1873, pp625-626).

for instance. There are many other examples. As above, I do not accept that any man has the right – or power – to bless another today. The proper understanding of the priesthood of all believers would put a stop to the nonsense at once. There is all the difference in asking for a blessing, and pronouncing one.

***4. ‘The priesthood of all believers’ is another way of expressing the biblical principle of an ‘all-body ministry’ in the church***

Very closely linked to the last point is something I have already noted. In a sense, it is the same point viewed the other way about. It bears repetition, nevertheless. The emphasis in the Bible is on the total involvement of believers in the worship and service of God. Routinely today, there seems to be a notion that church life, if not Christianity itself, is, for the majority, a ‘spectator sport’. A few get ‘involved’ – they are especially ‘keen’ – while the majority can watch (and criticise) from the safety of the sidelines. But God’s word cuts right across all such sinful goings-on. He stipulates that *all* his people must be totally involved in his service and worship. All are priests. ‘The priesthood of *all* believers’. *All* sacrifice. They all have a service to perform for him. There are no exceptions, no special cases. God has made all his people priests. Prayer (including public prayer meetings), gospel service, mutual instruction, reproof and edification, practical care of the saints, daily holiness and dedication to God, financial support of the gospel and its ministers, true spiritual humility... these are not just for the few, the fanatical super-saints, to be concerned about. They comprise the duty which God demands of *all* his people; he has made them *all* priests, and expects *all* of them to offer the sacrifices that he has commanded. There is no opting out, no holiday, no retirement. All God’s people, all their days, carry the responsibilities and privileges of being priests; they all engage in priestly duty in serving God. Or should do. Even though God raises stated and recognised teachers in his church, all believers are, in the proper sense, teaching ministers; all are gifted and appointed by Christ so that they may mutually edify one another. This is their duty. This is their privilege. I am not suggesting that



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all are able to address a congregation, but no child of God is without some ability to pass on a word of experience, encouragement, instruction, comfort, reproof... to a fellow-believer. Let me emphasise this. Scripture is rich on the subject:

For as we have many members in one body, but all members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives... I... am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another (Rom. 12:3-8; 15:14).

I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in everything by him in all utterance and all knowledge... so that you come short in no gift... There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all... God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as he pleased (1 Cor. 1:4-7; 12:1-40, especially 4-7,18).

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:5-6).

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling-place of God in the Spirit... To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift... for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ... from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love... Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers... Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the

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name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God (Eph. 2:19-22; 4:7-16,29; 5:18-21).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:16-17).

Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing (1 Thess. 5:11).

As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. Coming to him as a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen (1 Pet. 2:2-5; 4:10-11).

You, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh (Jude 20-23).

Is that not proof enough?

It is, I say, abundantly clear: All the saints are ministers; all engage in ministry. Note the emphasis, ‘to each one’. To each believer, Christ gives a gift or gifts so that each might serve the church. These passages tell us that *all* the saints are ministers, *all* are engaged in the ministry. We know that apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors-and-teachers are given to the churches, and used by Christ, in order to equip the saints for this work of the ministry (Eph. 4:11-16). Let me emphasise it: Christ gives teachers to his people *for the very purpose of fitting believers – all of them to engage in profitable ministry*. Filling believers’ heads (or notebooks) with facts, falls a long way short; a long way. Imagine, in a physical sense, always eating four square meals a day, and never doing any work, never doing anything productive with all

the calories, protein, and so on, which has been taken in. The very suggestion is laughable. So it ought to be in a spiritual sense.

All believers need constant, consistent and continual teaching. And that teaching is designed (or ought to be designed) to prepare every believer to engage in ‘the ministry’. This ‘work of the ministry’ is something *all* the saints are to do. It is not something reserved for elders or deacons; certainly it is not confined to an ‘ordained’ minister.

If I may pick just one verse from the above, may I stress: ‘Therefore comfort *each other* and edify *one another*, just as you also are doing’ (1 Thess. 5:11)? Could Paul say this to the majority of believers in the majority of churches today? I especially note the ‘just as you also are doing’. I am not talking about mere theory; ‘just as you also are doing’. Not ‘just as you used to do’; not ‘just as you once did’; not ‘just as you would like to do’. But ‘just as you also *are* doing’.

### ***5. ‘The priesthood of all believers’ emphasises the biblical principle of self-denial***

The concept of priestly sacrifice cuts across another aspect of so much so-called gospel preaching – and, consequently, spiritual life – which is, alas, all too common these days. So much is said, or at least implied, from the pulpit on ‘get, get, get’ from God and the gospel. Sinners are told how much God will give them... they have nothing to lose... everything will be better and better. At least, that’s the impression which too often I am left with. The gospel has become man-centred. But notice Paul’s way of expressing himself. He wanted to preach the gospel to sinners – Gentile sinners, in particular – to see them converted: ‘to make the Gentiles obedient... I have fully preached the gospel of Christ’ (Rom. 15:18-19). To make them obedient, I stress, not merely to make them beneficiaries. Believers gain enormous – infinite – benefits from Christ, of course. But the biblical emphasis on obedience must not be muted. (See also Rom. 1:5; 2:8; 6:17; 10:16,21; 11:30-32; 16:26; 2 Thess. 1:8; Heb. 3:18-19 with 4:6,11; 5:9; 1 Pet. 1:2,21-22; 2:7-8; 3:1; 4:17). For more on this, see my other works.

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I say again, the Bible sets out the vast benefits of the gospel in all that the Lord has done and will do for his people. Even so, Scripture also tells us of God's *demands* in the gospel. He requires repentance, turning from sin, total commitment, self-denial, the forsaking of the world and its ways as part of the cost of the gospel. And *these* demands upon sinners – God's demands – *they* need emphasis, too. Joshua showed the right spirit when confronting the Israelites in his final address to them. Nevertheless, in reply they certainly showed no lack of self-confidence. Oh, they could serve the LORD; it was as easy as falling off a log, they thought! Not at all, retorted Joshua. 'You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins'. He warned the people that God would visit any disobedience with judgement. Still the Israelites protested that they would serve God. Very well! 'Is that what you think?' Joshua spelled out to Israel the terms of the covenant, and demanded their practical obedience in the forsaking of their idols (Josh. 24:14-25). Count the cost! Count the cost!

And not only Joshua. Jesus preached it to sinners, and so must we (Luke 14:25-33). And we must live like it (2 Cor. 5:17; 1 Thess. 1:4-10). Daily (Luke 9:23, NIV).

And it is the doctrine and consequences of the priesthood of all believers which is a principal weapon in the constant battle against the dreadful effects of defective, if not false, teaching in this area. All believers are priests and have to sacrifice. Sacrifice! *That's* the word. Sacrifice is a part of the gospel. Christianity involves personal sacrifice. Give up nothing to become a Christian? Rubbish! 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new' (2 Cor. 5:17). All things! A gospel which promises everything at no cost to the sinner is not the gospel of Christ.

And there are preachers who do make it sound as if there is no cost involved in being a Christian. When I was a young believer, over fifty years ago, I seem to recall sinners and new converts, me among them, being assured from the pulpit that there was nothing to give up. Give up nothing? We should have been told we have to give up everything! If the assurance I was given in those days was commonplace, perhaps it might in part explain why things have

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gone so badly wrong this past half-century. A costless Christianity is not the Christianity of the Bible.

Of course, I have met the opposite end of the spectrum to the view I heard in those far-off days. I have altogether too often come across the notion that outward conformity produced by legalistic observance of man-made rules, minutely specified in all sorts of cultural areas, is the acid test of spirituality. I am not appealing for *that*! But I *am* thinking of the texts I quote in this section, calling for self-denial. Self-denial is a mark of a true believer.

Wait a minute! Isn't the gospel a gospel of *free* grace? Of course it is. Salvation is free to the sinner who repents and believes. Free! Not cheap! Free! Nevertheless, there is a cost, an enormous cost, and that cost was paid entirely by Christ. It cost him his life-blood, yielded up on the cross as a sacrifice to propitiate the wrath of God. Of course there is a cost. It fell upon the Lord Jesus.

But that's not what we are talking about. Not at all. We are concerned with the *consequences* of justification, not its *cause*. The notion of a costless Christianity, a costless sanctification, is grossly unbiblical. Speaking to believers, Paul could hardly have been more blunt:

Offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness... Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness... Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual [or reasonable] act of worship (Rom. 6:13,19; 12:1, all NIV).

Those verses, especially Romans 12:1, follow on directly from the clearest and fullest setting out of the doctrine of grace. 'In view of God's mercy', said the apostle. Compare the way the doctrine of the first three chapters of the Ephesians leads to practical out-working in the last three chapters. So much for Paul. As Christ put it, a man has to deny himself (Luke 9:23-26). When Peter rightly told Christ: 'We have left all and followed you', Christ immediately responded with a glorious promise (Mark 10:28-30). But the fact remains; Peter and the other disciples *had* forsaken all

for Christ. They ‘left their nets and followed him’ (Matt. 4:20), in more ways than one. Christ demands all. How recurrent and insistent was his command: ‘Follow me’ (Matt. 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 16:24; 19:21).

In light of this, we need to hear today, not quite so much on what we will get from the Lord, but a little more on how much he demands of us. ‘He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me’ (Matt. 10:37-38). The doctrine of every believer being duty-bound to engage in priestly sacrifice, if well taught – and even better, if well digested and acted upon – would do much to restore the biblical emphasis. And it *is* the biblical emphasis. Look at the verses I have just quoted from Matthew; and that’s only Matthew!

The worldling is *self-centred*; the believer is, or should be, *God-centred*! If the believer thought more of himself as a priest of the Lord, it would go a long way towards rectifying this prevalent cult of self-gratification and self-centredness. Naturally, since self is every man’s great pope,<sup>6</sup> selfishness is widespread among unbelievers. Number one comes first! But it should not be so much as named among believers. Sadly, too often it is more than ‘named’!

***6. ‘The priesthood of all believers’ puts an end to the nonsense of dividing the believer’s life into the secular and the sacred***

When the believer rightly understands that he is a priest, and comes to grasp the nature of the sacrifices that he is expected to offer in the exercise of his ‘priesthood’, he will soon see what a mistake it is to try to divide his life into the sacred and the secular. It is all one, all of a piece. God takes account of his people’s lives in every aspect of them – home, church, family, job and relaxation. The believer is always a priest. And God calls the believer to look upon every part of his life as an acceptable spiritual sacrifice to

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<sup>6</sup> See the earlier extract from Luther.

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him, if offered and lived in the way he has revealed. ‘Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God’ (1 Cor. 10:31). Every believer is a priest, devoted to God and his service.

And God requires his priests to be always about their duty. They are always to be engaged in offering their sacrifices. No part of the life of a believer is exempt from the service of God. There is no such thing as ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ in the life of a Christian. All is dedicated to God and, therefore, sacred. The believer, himself, is to be dedicated to God. As a priest of God, the believer is never ‘off duty’. Once a priest, always a priest; always a priest, in every place, and at all times.

Now when a believer rightly appreciates that he is continually engaged in the worship of God as a priest, it adds indescribable dignity to his daily life and duty. What meaning it puts into his continued existence on earth! Humdrum at times it may seem to him, but it is never really so. All of it, he realises, is done as unto God, done as a priestly sacrifice to him, and is received by God himself as a sacrificial offering with which he is well pleased. Nothing in the believer’s life is small, trivial or insignificant. Nothing. All is dedicated to God. As George Herbert put it:

*Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things Thee to see,  
And what I do in anything  
To do it as for Thee.*

*All may of Thee partake:  
Nothing can be so mean,  
Which with this tincture – ‘for Thy sake’ –  
Will not grow bright and clean.*

*A servant with this clause  
Makes drudgery divine:  
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,  
Makes that and th’ action fine.*

*This is the famous stone  
That turneth all to gold;  
For that which God doth touch and own  
Cannot for less be told.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> *The Elixir* (oremus.org/hymnal/t/t021.html).

**7. *‘The priesthood of all believers’ means that Christ, and Christ only, comes between a believer and God, and brings the believer to God***

The doctrine of ‘the priesthood of all believers’ sets out one of the principal glories of the gospel. Which is? There is no one between a believer and his God – other than the Lord Jesus Christ. No man, no angel. In particular, no earthly priest.

This ties in very strongly with what I said a few moments ago about sacerdotalism. These two sections need to be read in tandem. What I said there applies here. In all this, I am not talking merely about Rome. As I have shown in other works, Rome does not have a monopoly on popes and intermediaries; far from it.

The priesthood of all believers destroys the abominable notion that a believer needs an intermediary to bring him to Christ, and to gain access to God. How? Because every believer is a true priest of the Lord in his own right. Consequently, he stands in need of no other priest since he, himself, has been given the right of access to God. He does not have to torment himself, like Esther did when approaching King Ahasuerus (Esth. 4:11,16): Will the king receive me or not? Will I be executed? The believer knows – *knows*, I say – that God will always accept him. *Always*. Wherever a believer is, and whenever he wishes to come to God, he has an immediate entrance into the presence of the Most High, through his great high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Not only does the believer have access to God through Christ – he is *in* Christ! He could not possibly be closer to God! Let me re-quote Catesby Paget:

*So nigh, so very nigh to God,  
I cannot nearer be;  
For in the person of his Son,  
I am as near as he.*

Furthermore, not only does he have no need of another priest in addition to Christ – no one can ever block his way to God. ‘I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it’ (Rev. 3:8). God has opened the way of priestly access for all his people. No one can hinder them. Thus, I say again, the priesthood of all believers is one of the principal glories of the new covenant.



### **8. *'The priesthood of all believers' is a spur to godliness***

This doctrine of 'the priesthood of all believers' is a great spur to practical godliness. Let me explain. Am I a believer? If so, I am a priest of the Lord. A priest? Am I always a priest, engaged in the service of my God and King? Am I always on duty? Then how can I live an ungodly life? When tempted, how can I do this – whatever it is – and sin against my God (Gen. 39:9)? If my body is to be a living sacrifice to God, God who will only accept a clean sacrifice, what kind of life should I live? What kind of things should I avoid? Such questions, faithfully asked and answered, can only serve to promote true godliness of life.

Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation (Ps. 24:3-5).

The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him... The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous (Prov. 15:8,29, NIV).

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Matt. 5:8).

Holiness, without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

And when the believer sins? God has told us and assured us:

Take words with you, and return to the LORD. Say to him: 'Take away all iniquity; receive us graciously, for we will offer the sacrifices of our lips' (Hos. 14:2).

According to the man in the street, a priest is 'a man of God', and the world knows he should be a holy man. Witness the outrage felt at the scandalous abuse of children by papist priests, brought to public light at the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

Very well. The cap fits the Reformed and the evangelical Christian, as well as any Roman Catholic. Allowing the parlance, every believer is a priest, a man of God. Every believer surely realises that it is essential not to stain his testimony for Christ. If and when the believer falls, Christ's reputation goes down with him. 'If *that's* your gospel, if *that's* Christianity...'

I recall Al Martin of New Jersey, who preached many times in the UK in the second half of the 20th century, saying that he

thought God had made him a minister because he knew his (Martin's) need to be kept from sin. The thought of bringing public disgrace to Christ, if he fell as a minister, served as a sharp spur to keeping him godly. All believers – each believer – should argue the same.

***9. 'The priesthood of all believers' is of the greatest encouragement to the believer***

This doctrine of 'the priesthood of all believers' is of the greatest encouragement to the child of God. Every believer should remind himself, and remind himself frequently, that he is a priest of the Lord. 'I am a priest – a priest of God himself'. A royal priest. Think! What a privilege is this. What dignity God has placed upon his child and his worship. Poor, weak, helpless and hopeless sinners, elevated to the priesthood! I ask you! The weakest and rawest believer has this dignity, whatever his circumstances of life and experience, whatever his educational or class background, whatever his intellectual attainments – or lack of them! He has the certain knowledge that he and his worship are pleasing to Almighty God, if he presents himself and his worship to God in the way the Lord GOD has ordained.

The believer, quite rightly, may not have a very high regard for himself and his worship; he may not think it amounts to much. God says that it is a delight to him. What an encouragement is this to the child of God. How amazing it is to think – to think that the holy God, offended and angry because of my sin, has, nevertheless, by the work of Christ under the terms of the new covenant, taken me, and distinguished me by elevating me to the honour of the royal priesthood. What an encouragement, I say again. What a distinction the Almighty has placed upon me. To be a Christian is the greatest privilege in the world. A child of God is a royal priest of the Most High God.

Every believer has this distinction, this honour. Reader, if you are resting in Christ as your Lord and Saviour, *you* have this standing before God. Now. And always. And for ever. You are a priest – a priest of God Most High. Tell yourself now: I am, by God's grace, a royal priest.

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But, reader, if you do not know Christ as *your* Redeemer, does ‘the priesthood of all believers’ matter? Is it of any consequence? To you, I mean. Does it matter?

In one sense, no. You are not a believer. But, the truth is, if you are not a priest of God – in other words, if you are not a true believer – you dare not die! Does *that* matter? Not fit to die? You dare not die? Of course not. You are in no fit state to die and stand before God in the judgement – as you most certainly will:

God... commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man [Christ Jesus] whom he has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

We must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgement (Heb. 9:27).

[All] will give an account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead (1 Pet. 4:5).

Do not miss the general, universal emphasis: ‘*All men everywhere... appointed for men*’, please note. And by ‘men’, of course, Scripture means ‘every human being’. Every human being will have to face God in judgement. Every one of us; including me, including you. We – all of us – shall have to give an account.

Notice the argument in Acts 17: ‘God... commands all men everywhere to repent, *because...*’. Because you will be judged one day soon, God commands you to repent. Now, since he commands you to repent, it must be his desire and pleasure that you do repent. That is why, all day long, he stretches out his hands to a disobedient and contrary people (Rom. 10:21). Oh, do not refuse! If you do, you know the consequences. Listen to Wisdom crying out to men (Prov. 1:20; 8:4) – that is, listen to Christ calling out to *you*:

Because I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded, because you disdained all my counsel, and would have none of my rebuke, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your terror comes, when your terror comes like a storm, and your destruction comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but they will not find me. Because they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the

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LORD, they would have none of my counsel and despised my every rebuke. Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way, and be filled to the full with their own fancies (Prov. 1:24-31).

Reader, do not let this happen to you, I plead with you. What can you do? What should you do? Listen: ‘As it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgement, so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many’ (Heb. 9:27-28). Do not miss the ‘as... so’. At the very least, this is telling you of God’s grace and willingness to save sinners. *As* – because – sinners are under appointment to die and face judgement, *so* God sent Christ to die as a sacrifice to save. Oh, I plead with you, do not rest until you know that Christ by his sacrifice has saved *you* from your sins! Listen to the following. No! Act upon it. Do it. Now:

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God... We then, as workers together with him, also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain... Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 5:20; 6:1-2).

I ‘implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God’. Speaking to believers, the apostle explained:

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation... For he made him who knew no sin to be sin [or a sin offering] for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5:19,21).

There is only one thing to do. Do it now! Repent and come to Christ at once. Come to him as the only priest whose sacrifice can save from sin. Come to Christ as the only priest and sacrifice who can bring *you* to God and save *you* from *your* sins. Repent of your sins, turn from them and turn to Christ, come to him and rest in his one sacrifice – the sacrifice of himself and his blood. If you do, you will be eternally saved, and saved now. Jesus said: ‘Come to me... and I will give you rest’ (Matt. 11:28). Again, he said: ‘The one who comes to me I will by no means cast out’ (John 6:37). So... come! He will receive you!

What is more, you will at once become one of the priests of God in the new covenant. In fact, at that very moment, you will

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become the newest recruit to that glorious host. And if so, I invite you to go back to the beginning of this small book, and read it all over again. Read it, as it were, with a fresh eye – now that you are newly converted and, as such, have just become a member of that most select band of men and women on earth – the priesthood of all believers.

I think that the most appropriate way in which I can bring this work to a close, is to turn yet once more to the words of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, words he wrote as he drew near to the end of his letter – in which, as we have seen, he so clearly set out the biblical doctrine of priesthood. I hope nobody runs away with the wrong impression when I quote him to say: ‘I appeal to you, brethren; bear with the word of exhortation’ (Heb. 13:22). I certainly do not imply any suggestion of importance about my work commensurate to that which attaches to his letter. No. But, in the spirit I have quoted him, I hope it will be received. ‘I appeal to you, brethren; bear with the word of exhortation’.

Finally, I turn back to the verses immediately before that. Having dealt so thoroughly with the new covenant compared to the old, and in every respect shown the glory of Christ, the superiority of Christ – ‘better’ is the key word (he uses it about a dozen times in his letter) – the writer now lifts his readers’ eyes and, it is to be hoped, their hearts, to Christ, earnestly desiring to move them to serve their glorious high priest, the one who died to save them, and was raised for their justification, and wrought their sanctification. He points them to the need for God, through his Spirit, to give them the grace to do it. He prays for it. In so doing, he addresses his readers, naturally, in the second person. Not writing with his authority, and wanting – needing – to include myself, I have taken the liberty of quoting the text in the first person:

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make [us] complete in every good work to do his will, working in [us] what is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen (Heb. 13:20-21).