

## *Preamble*

‘I believe in the priesthood of all believers’. Good! But, believing reader, have you thought much about what ‘the priesthood of all believers’ means? If so, how does your belief in this priesthood affect your outlook on life, and the way you live it? Does it make any particular difference to you? Does it matter? How should it affect you? What are the consequences of every believer being a priest? What are the consequences for *you*? I speak of your experience, both personal and among other believers. That is my question: The priesthood of all believers – what part does it play in your life and in your church?

This truth is taught in 1 Peter 2:4-10:

You also... are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... You are a chosen generation [people], a royal priesthood.

Here we have it. The priesthood of all believers, the priesthood of all believers under the new covenant. That is our subject.

Let me explain how I intend to explore the issue. Having, in my ‘First Principles’, set out the biblical principles of ‘priesthood’, as God made them known to Israel under the law, I will now draw on those principles and apply them, within New Testament limits, to believers about *their* priesthood in the new covenant.

But, before I do, I must try to answer two questions. First, am I justified in doing it? Is it right to take 1 Peter 2:4-10, and expound and apply it to believers, by comparing it with the old covenant? This enquiry is vital. Our principles of interpretation must be sorted out before we embark on any study of Scripture, with its consequent application. We must do it here. It is especially important here.

***May we expound ‘the priesthood of all believers’ by reference to the levitical priesthood?***

Of course, the simple, blunt answer is: If not there, where? Pagan priesthood? As we have seen, it was Peter who raised the subject

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(1 Pet. 2:4-10). Where did *he* mean us to go? What would Peter's original readers, hearers, have made of his words? What ground-rules did Peter himself want his readers to use? That, surely, is the way in which we must approach the passage, to stop us foisting an unjustified interpretation on to it, and drawing an unwarranted application out of it. How the apostle intended his readers to read his words must be the way for us.

We can be definite about what Peter intended, and what his readers would have made of his words. As soon as he mentioned 'priesthood', their minds would have flown to the Old Testament. Those whom Peter first addressed as priests would instinctively have thought in such terms, as he, an ex-Jew, did himself. The internal evidence of the book shows that many of the apostle's readers had a Jewish background. Note the Old Testament extracts in 1 Peter 1:16,25; 2:6-8,22; 3:12,14; 4:8,18; 5:5. On hearing the apostle's words in 1 Peter 2:4-10, therefore, his hearers would recall the old covenant. That covenant, particularly its priesthood, would spring to mind. It was inevitable.

By 'ex-Jew', I am not saying that Peter was no longer a Jewish man, but I am drawing attention to the fact that, as such, he was now a follower of Christ (compare Acts 16:1). My point is, after conversion, Peter's thinking, speaking and writing were still instinctively coloured by his native Jewishness and the Old Testament, and his metaphors, idioms, nuances and allusions – let alone his direct references – must be understood and interpreted with that in mind. Take the opening chapters of Acts. In his addresses to those who would know what he was talking about, how frequently Peter turned to the Old Testament (Acts 1:16-17,20; 2:16-21,25-31,34-35,39; 3:18,21-25; 4:11-12). He was not unique. A glance through Romans will show how often Paul used the Old Testament to make his case. The classic example is, of course, the letter to the Hebrews. And, apart from direct references, Old Testament allusions abound throughout the New.

It is clear, therefore, that this was a common occurrence with the early believers, so many of whom had Jewish antecedents. Take John 1:29,36, as just one example. An uninitiated man today, hearing a preacher call out: 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!', would be utterly mystified. John

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Baptist's hearers, however, because of their Jewish background, got it in one.

And this is the way we must go about things. New Testament allusions are very frequently based on the Old. And that is what is happening here. Take the 'priesthood' in this passage. It is only by understanding the old priesthood that we can make any sense of what Peter is talking about. So that is why we must get a firm hold of the Old Testament priesthood before we launch out into 'the priesthood of all believers'. I go further. Having got to grips with the principles of the levitical priesthood, we *must* apply them to our priesthood in the new covenant. But, as I have said, we must do so within the confines of the New Testament. And the same goes for all Peter's 'metaphors' in this passage:

You also... are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... You are a chosen generation [people], a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people...

'A spiritual house, a holy priesthood... a chosen generation [people], a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people'. The Jewish overtones are unmistakable. Peter clearly intended his readers, who were well acquainted with his Jewish nuances, to take him in that way. Meeting Peter's words, immediately they would have thought of the people of Israel, and done so in terms of *their* 'temple, priesthood, kingship, nationhood', and *their* being 'God's special, elect people'. Quite right too! That was precisely what Peter intended. But *then* they would have read – heard – the apostle telling them: '*You* also... *You* are... *You!* As believers, this is what *you* are!' And they would have been right to let his words sink into their minds and hearts, dwelling on the echo, saying to each other: 'Do you know... this is true. We believers are... *This* is what we believers are. We are... Isn't it incredible! *We* – we believers – *we* are a spiritual house, a holy priesthood... a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own special people... Once *we* were not a people, but now *we* are the people of God... Once *we* had not obtained mercy, but now *we* have obtained mercy' (see 1 Pet. 2:4-10). All this is true of... *us!*

I am sure this is what Peter's original readers would have made of it. I agree with Cyril Eastwood:

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When the New Testament writers spoke of the royal priesthood, they were not setting it over against an established doctrine, [but] they were asserting that it was the fulfilment of the purpose of God which was made known to the old Israel, but which only culminated in the coming of Christ and in the creation of the new Israel.<sup>1</sup>

Let me say it again: I am sure this is what Peter's original readers would have made of it. The point I am driving at is, of course, that this is what *we* must make of it. We *may*, we *must* draw the comparison. Indeed, in making the comparison, we must raise it far above the earthly and temporal, raising it so far as to make a *contrast*. We must take all the things in Peter's list, and lift them to the spiritual, the eternal, the heavenly – as Peter himself did: 'You also... are being built up a *spiritual* house, a holy priesthood, to offer up *spiritual* sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people'. In particular, he told believers, you are 'a royal priesthood'. Hence, the priesthood of all believers. Yes, but with this vital proviso: whereas the old-covenant sacrifices of the levitical priests were physical, the new-covenant sacrifices of believers are spiritual. *This* is the comparison. This is the *contrast*. And there is more to come.

This, therefore, is our warrant for taking old-covenant practices, determining the principles, and applying those principles to ourselves as believers under the new covenant, but making sure that in every respect we do it in a spiritual way, and not carnally, in a literal way. To do *that* would be a disaster. Worse, it would be an abomination to God, since the old covenant is now obsolete and abolished. But doing it spiritually is the very thing God intended when moving Peter to pen these words. Hence my book. *This* is what I want to do. I want to draw the analogy between the priesthood of the Levites and the priesthood of believers, and do it as the New Testament does – in a spiritual way.

Here we have the principle: The new-covenant fulfilment and application of old-covenant language, terms, ordinances, promises, prophecies and commands, strips out the external, Jewish element

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<sup>1</sup> Cyril Eastwood: *The Priesthood Of All Believers: An Examination of the Doctrine from the Reformation to the Present Day*, The Epworth Press, London, 1960, p242.

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as we pass from the old covenant to the new, since the former has been abolished in the change of covenant. This is how the New Testament reads the Old. It is the way *we* must do it. The application is to be spiritual and inward, not literal and external.

For example, how should believers apply to themselves, and their circumstances, the dancing, the timbrels, harps, trumpets, lutes, stringed instruments, flutes and cymbals of such passages as, say, Psalms 33,81,98,149 and 150? Those who want to use them to justify physical practices in the assemblies of God's people today will look in vain for any New Testament warrant for literal orchestras, for instance. And if they persist in applying such verses physically, it won't be long before they are grasping a physical 'two-edged sword in their hand, to execute vengeance on the nations, and punishment on the peoples; to bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron; to execute on them the written judgement – this honour have all [God's] saints', 'the high praises of God... in their mouth' as they cut, thrust and slash (Ps. 149:6-9).<sup>2</sup> If they get involved in such antics, it will be in direct contradiction of 2 Corinthians 10:3-6. And it will be yet another example of the dictum: 'The one lesson we learn from history is that we never learn from history'. History is littered with the calamitous consequences of such behaviour.

In the New Testament, no longer is there any concern over land, an earthly kingdom, a physical temple, physical circumcision, and so on. As the light of the rising sun makes the candle superfluous, so the coming of Christ and the gospel has banished into oblivion those temporary old-covenant props. Glorious in their day, their day is over. They are out-dated, obsolete and finished. The New Testament is its own interpreter. In this regard, I find Acts 24:14 intriguing; Paul believed 'everything that agrees with the law and that is written in the prophets' (NIV), 'in accordance with the law...' (NASB). So must we, as I am sure the apostle did, in the new-covenant, the spiritual, sense.

As for the prophets, take just one example. The new-covenant interpretation and fulfilment of Jeremiah 30, 31 and 33 is given in Hebrews 7:18-19,22; 8:6-13; 10:1-18. To think of Jeremiah's

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<sup>2</sup> In the United States, Dominionism and Christian Imperialism are on the high road to it even now.

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prophecy as literal to the Jews, the setting up of David's kingship once again, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, its establishment for ever, and the reinstatement and immense enlargement of the levitical priesthood with its sacrificial ministry, is appalling. It runs entirely contrary to the letter to the Hebrews.

We have all come across the misapplication of the Old Testament that I am writing against. Take the charismatics. They get this badly wrong. How strongly they stress the physical – the lifting of the hands, for instance – when the proper application and experience of such old-covenant principles and expressions is spiritual.

Not so bad – but, nevertheless, not without considerable loss – is the practice of those who restrict their singing to the psalms. I find this misguided. Never to sing, for example, paraphrases of New Testament passages, or moving compositions which deal *expressly*, not in dim shadow, with new-covenant topics and themes – Christ and the atonement, justification, sanctification, reconciliation, freedom from the law, the inner witness of the Spirit, and so on? To be constantly using old-covenant terminology in new-covenant worship, however much sanctified by hoary tradition, must, to say the least, produce some loss in expression of heart-feeling after Christ, his work and his gospel. Imagine preferring a photograph to the real and actual person!

In my opinion, Isaac Watts was fully justified in setting psalms in new-covenant language. Let me quote from his Preface: 'An Enquiry into the right Way of fitting the Book of Psalms for Christian Worship':

I have expressed myself as I may suppose David would have done, had he lived in the days of Christianity [the new covenant]. And by this means perhaps I have sometimes hit upon the true intent [meaning] of the Spirit of God in those verses, farther and clearer than David himself could ever discover, as Peter encourages me to hope (1 Pet. 1:11-12)... I hope my reader will find... some new beauties and connections of thought discovered in the Jewish poet, though not in the language of a Jew. In all places I have kept my grand design in view, and that is to teach my author to speak like a Christian.

Watts went on to explain his meaning and give examples:

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For why should I now address God my Saviour in a song with burnt sacrifices of fatlings and with the incense of rams? Why should I pray to be sprinkled with hyssop, or recur to the blood of bullocks and goats? Why should I bind my sacrifice with cords to the horns of an altar, or sing the praises of God to high sounding cymbals, when the gospel has shown me a nobler [the only!] atonement for sin, and appointed a purer and more spiritual worship? Why must I join with David in his legal or prophetic language to curse my enemies, when my Saviour in his sermons has taught me to love and bless them?... What need is there that I should wrap up the shining honours of my Redeemer in the dark and shadowy language of a religion [the old covenant] that is now for ever abolished, especially when Christians are so vehemently warned in the letters of Paul against a Judaizing spirit in their worship as well as doctrine? And what fault can there be in enlarging a little on the more useful subjects in the style of the gospel, where the Psalm gives any occasion, since the whole religion of the Jews is censured often in the New Testament as a defective and imperfect thing?<sup>3</sup>

I agree. Who would be without Watts' version of Psalm 122? I know I wouldn't:

*How pleased and blest was I  
To hear the people cry,  
'Come, let us seek our God today!'  
Yes, with a cheerful zeal  
We haste to Zion's hill,  
And there our vows and honours pay.*

*Zion, thrice happy place,  
Adorned with wondrous grace,  
And walls of strength embrace thee round;  
In thee our tribes appear  
To pray, and praise, and hear  
The sacred gospel's joyful sound.*

*There David's greater Son  
Has fixed his royal throne,  
He sits for grace and judgement there:  
He bids the saint be glad,  
He makes the sinner sad,  
And humble souls rejoice with fear.*

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<sup>3</sup> [ccel.org/cceh/archives/eee/wattspre.htm](http://ccel.org/cceh/archives/eee/wattspre.htm)

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*May peace attend thy gate,  
And joy within thee wait  
To bless the soul of every guest!  
The man that seeks thy peace,  
And wishes thine increase,  
A thousand blessings on him rest!*

*My tongue repeats her vows,  
'Peace to this sacred house!'  
For there my friends and kindred dwell;  
And since my glorious God  
Makes thee his blest abode,  
My soul shall ever love thee well.*

Just in case it needs to be said, ‘the house of God’ does not refer to any physical building; rather, it speaks of the spiritual building, the church, believers. Christ’s house, the walls of Zion, Zion itself, are all spiritual. This is precisely the new-covenant understanding of Psalm 122.

And this is why I can cite David, and others like him, when talking about the priesthood of all believers. Let me explain. The fact is, although the likes of David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel... were living under the old covenant, they were, in truth, spiritual men and women of the new covenant by anticipation. Of course they spoke in old-covenant terms – they could do nothing else – but, reading their words in the light of the New Testament, we can see the spiritual meaning of what they were saying. They, too, in a measure, saw that spiritual meaning, and felt it.

Thus the psalmist spoke for all new-covenant people of both ages when he exclaimed: ‘Oh, how I love your law!’ (Ps. 119:97). ‘Love’ is a heart-word. Throughout Psalm 119, note the connection between ‘law, commandments, testimonies, statutes, precepts, judgements’, and so on, and such words as ‘heart, whole heart, rejoice, delight, longing, love’, and the like. The man who prefers the law above ‘thousands of coins of gold and silver’ (Ps. 119:72), shows us where his heart is (Matt. 6:21). See also Psalm 1:2; 40:8. In this matter, there is no difference between David and Paul, when he declared: ‘I delight in the law of God according to the inward man’ (Rom. 7:22).

Here we reach a crux in the argument. So important is this issue, I must say a few words about ‘the law’.



***A few words on the believer and ‘the law’***

I stress the ‘few’. I intend to set out my full argument in my forthcoming book on the law. Nevertheless, a few words are necessary here. David and Paul both spoke of ‘the law’. What did David, speaking in the old covenant, mean by it? What did Paul, in the new?

Let me grasp the nettle. Although it is almost universally assumed that ‘the law’, in its old-covenant sense, means ‘the ten commandments’, this assumption is wide of the mark. Rarely, in fact, does ‘the law’ mean the ten commandments; rather, it nearly always includes the hundreds of other Mosaic commands. How many realise that the phrase ‘ten commandments’ occurs only three times in the entire Bible (Ex. 34:28, Deut. 4:13; 10:4), never once in the New Testament? In saying this, I have not forgotten 2 Corinthians 3:3,7. The truth is, ‘the law’, in its old-covenant sense, overwhelmingly refers to ‘the Mosaic legislation or revelation’. Indeed, it can refer to the Old Testament Scriptures – Genesis, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah and (probably) Ezekiel and Daniel, for instance – as New Testament citations prove (John 10:34; 12:34; 15:25; Rom. 3:10-20; 1 Cor. 14:21; Gal. 4:21-22).

So when David said: ‘Oh, how I love your law!’ (Ps. 119:97), he was undoubtedly speaking of something far larger than the ten commandments, something larger even than the entire Mosaic law. After all, as he told us: ‘My eyes are awake through the night watches, that I may meditate on your *word*’ (Ps. 119:148, NKJV, AV; NIV uses ‘promises’; NASB margin has ‘promise’). David was speaking about God’s *entire* word, as he knew it, was he not? It was the sum of God’s revelation, as David had it at that time, God’s will made known in his word, that David loved, and upon which he meditated ‘day and night’, ‘all the day’ (Ps. 1:2; 119:97). As he said: ‘I desire to do your will, O my God, and your law is within my heart’ (Ps. 40:8). Clearly, by ‘God’s law’, David meant: ‘God’s will revealed to me in his word’. I doubt that many Israelites felt as David, however. For the overwhelming majority, ‘the law’ would have meant ‘the Mosaic legislation’.

But the Old Testament uses ‘the law’ in a second way; namely, as a vital feature of the old-covenant prophecy of the new covenant:

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In the last days, the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths'. The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem... (Isa. 2:1-4, NIV).

Here is my servant... I will put my Spirit on him... In his law the islands will put their hope (Isa. 42:1-4, NIV).

I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt... This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts... (Jer. 31:31-34, NIV).

In the last days... the law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem (Mic. 4:1-2, NIV).

And we are left in no doubt as to the new-covenant fulfilment of all this. It is the gospel of Christ (2 Cor. 3:3; Heb. 8:8-13; 10:15-16). The prophets were not prophesying that, in the new covenant, the law of Moses would be written on the believer's heart, that the church would be engaged in preaching the law of Moses throughout the world. The prophets were talking of Christ, Christ and his gospel, salvation (1 Pet. 1:9-12)! And *that* is what the Old Testament meant by 'the law' when it referred to the new covenant. It was looking forward to the coming of Christ, and the establishment of his law, 'the law of Christ'. When David said: 'Oh, how I love your law!' (Ps. 119:97), this is the fuller meaning he intended – as a new-covenant man living in the time of the old covenant, and to the measure he had been given spiritual understanding of the coming of the Messiah and his work.

Now for the New Testament. What does *it* mean when it talks about 'the law'? It can mean one of two things. Almost invariably the New Testament uses 'the law' in its old-covenant sense; in other words, as 'the Mosaic legislation', including the ten commandments.

From time to time, however, when quoting the Old Testament, the New uses 'the law' in the same way as the prophets did when they were prophesying of the new covenant – the New Testament, in fact, fulfilling the prophets; in other words, by taking 'the law'

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as the ‘law of Christ’. And this is precisely what Paul is doing in the text I have already quoted: ‘I delight in the law of God according to the inward man’ (Rom. 7:22). The context (especially Rom. 7:21 – 8:4, but see from Rom. 6:14) proves it. It always does. The apostle said he delighted in ‘the law’, by which he meant the true, spiritual meaning of the law of Moses; that is, Christ, the gospel, ‘the law of Christ’. ‘In other words, what he is saying in effect is: “I have now come to see the true meaning of the law”’.<sup>4</sup> Paul delighted in the gospel, ‘the law of Christ’, ‘the law of the Spirit of life’ (Rom. 8:2), which he could not more strongly contrast with the old law, ‘the law of sin and death’.

Take James, speaking of ‘the perfect law of liberty’ (Jas. 1:25), ‘the perfect law that gives freedom’ (NIV). He was certainly *not* referring to the ten commandments, let alone the Mosaic legislation. No! James was speaking of the entire word of God, especially the gospel, ‘the law of Christ’. The believer cannot possibly call the Mosaic law ‘the law of liberty’ (Jas. 2:12), ‘the law that gives freedom’ (NIV). James was talking about ‘the law of Christ’.<sup>5</sup>

This is how we, in the new covenant, should read the Old Testament. Take Solomon, son of David. In Proverbs 6:20, and on, he spoke to his son about his (the son’s) parents’ law. What should we make of this? Is it just that a child should obey his parents? Very good, of course, but is that all we can draw from Solomon’s words? Spurgeon was clear: ‘Solomon... evidently speaks of those who find in the parents’ law and in God’s law the same thing... Solomon... says that God’s law, by which I understand the whole

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<sup>4</sup> D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 7:1 – 8:4...*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1973, p217.

<sup>5</sup> I will fully argue my reasons for both assertions when I publish my book on the law. For now, for the first, I point to Rom. 3:27; 8:2; 1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2; Phil. 3:16; and for the second, to Rom. 6:14-15; 7:4,6; Gal. 4:21 – 5:1. As for Jas 2:12, note how James speaks of ‘the law’ (Jas. 2:9-11) – meaning at least the ten commandments – before he moves, in verse 12, to ‘the law of liberty’. He is making a stark contrast here. If not, why did he not continue in the same vein, and use the phrase ‘that law’, ‘the law’ or ‘the whole law’, or somesuch? Why ‘the law of liberty’, ‘the law that gives freedom’? Note the NIV’s admirable change of paragraph between verse 11 and 12. It was right. See Lloyd-Jones: *Romans* 7 pp290-291.

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run of Scripture, and, especially, the gospel of Jesus Christ, will be a guide to us'.<sup>6</sup> This bears repetition: 'God's law, by which I understand the whole run of Scripture, and, especially, the gospel of Jesus Christ'. In short, when the believer reads 'the law', if the context gives him the warrant (and that is always clear), his mind should fly to 'the law of Christ'.

The law of Christ? As Christ himself said:

If you hold to my teaching... then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free... If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed... My word... I am telling you what I have seen in my Father's presence (John 8:31-38, NIV).

'My teaching, the truth, my word, what I have seen in my Father's presence'. Moses' law for the old covenant; Christ's law for the new. 'The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17, NIV).

The law of Christ! Listen to the apostles expanding on it, contrasting it with the Mosaic law:

Through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2, NIV).

If the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory... will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!... [For the Jews, Moses'] veil remains when the old covenant is read... Only in Christ is it taken away... Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Cor. 3:7-17, NIV).

Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?... [Hagar and Sarah] represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar... and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our [that is, believers'] mother... What does the Scripture say? 'Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son'. Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by

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<sup>6</sup> C.H.Spurgeon: *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit...* 1871, Passmore & Alabaster, London, 1872, pp589-590.

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a yoke<sup>7</sup> of slavery... You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’... If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under [the, AV, NKJV, NASB] law... Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ (Gal. 4:21 – 6:2, NIV).

Do not merely listen to the word...<sup>8</sup> Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word, but does not do what it says, is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does... Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom (Jas. 1:22-25; 2:12, NIV).

Are these statements not clear? Notice how death and slavery and bondage are connected with the Mosaic covenant, including the ten commandments, while righteousness and freedom and liberty are connected with the Spirit’s reign and ministry through the entire word of God, the teaching of Christ, the gospel; in short, ‘the law of Christ’. Believers are not under the old covenant, not under its sense of ‘the law’ – that is, under the Mosaic legislation, including the ten commandments. They are under grace. And this, please note is not – as is very commonly claimed – for justification only. The believer is not under ‘the law’ for justification or sanctification. The believer is not under ‘the law’, full stop:

You are not under law, but under grace... We are not under law but under grace... You... died to the law through the body of Christ... We have been released from the law, so that we serve in the new way of

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<sup>7</sup> And we know what ‘yoke’ we are talking about. Peter, addressing the assembly at Jerusalem, refuting the Judaisers who were trying to bring believers under the Mosaic law, spelled it out: ‘Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?’ (Acts 15:10, NIV).

<sup>8</sup> Note ‘the word’ – not merely the ten commandments, nor even the entire law of Moses. Compare this with ‘looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom’ (Jas. 1:25). It is as plain as a pikestaff. ‘The law of liberty, the perfect law that gives freedom’ is *not* the ten commands or the entire law of Moses. It is ‘the word of God’, the *entire* word of God, as read by believers through new-covenant glasses, and interpreted and applied to their hearts by the Holy Spirit under that new covenant.

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the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code (Rom. 6:14-15; 7:4,6, all NIV).<sup>9</sup>

I do not want to protract these ‘few words’, even though I am sorely tempted! But if anyone thinks I am teaching antinomianism (anti-law), they could not be more wrong. I am utterly convinced with the apostle that ‘the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good’ (Rom. 7:12, NIV). The fault does not lie with the law. It is with me and my sin (Rom. 7:7 – 8:4). Furthermore, I have asserted that believers are under the law of Christ. As I made clear in my *Infant Baptism Tested*, this law is more penetrating than the law of Moses. I am no antinomian! As I say, I will greatly enlarge upon all these points when I publish on the law, including a refutation of the accusation of antinomianism. So let me close these ‘few words’ on the law by an extract from D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones on Romans 7:6 and 8:2. I must say that if I am an antinomian, Lloyd-Jones, in this passage, seems to have had the same size as me in caps:

‘We have been delivered from the law’. This is a very strong word. Some translate it as ‘discharged’, ‘set at liberty’, ‘set free’. We are no longer under the law; we have had a complete discharge from it. [Speaking of every believer, the law] has no authority over him any longer; he has finished with [it... The question is] in what sense has the Christian been delivered from the law?... [First,] the law which held us could not justify us, as we were told back in [Rom. 3:20]. We are freed from that. But the point about which the apostle is most concerned here is that we are delivered from the inability of the law to sanctify us. While we were under the law we could never be

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<sup>9</sup> Why ‘law’ and not ‘the law’ in Rom. 6:14-15? Lloyd-Jones: ‘I am very ready to agree with the vast majority of commentators who say that it not only means the Mosaic law, but also law in general, law as a principle... There are only two positions; we are either ‘under law’, or else we are ‘under grace’... The term ‘law’... obviously means, not the ceremonial law, but the demands of the moral law’ (D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Romans: An Exposition of Romans 6...*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1972, pp182,196; see whole section beginning on p179). In my forthcoming book on the law I will explain why I reject the traditional and almost universal ‘threefold division’ of the law into moral, ceremonial and judicial parts. Even so, we should not tug the forelock at Lloyd-Jones’ words – and then move on.

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sanctified. The law can no more sanctify us than it can justify us. While we were held there we could not be joined to the one [that is, Christ] who can sanctify us as well as justify us. We had no freedom; but now we have been delivered. Now there is the possibility of sanctification. If I can but get out of the clutches, as it were, of that first husband [that is, the law], and be joined to another [that is, Christ], there is hope for me. There was no hope while I was under the law; but now I am set free. I am delivered from my inability to experience sanctification. This what the apostle is particularly concerned to emphasise... The law of God always leads to death... 'The law of sin and death' means 'the law of God'... The law of God leads to sin; it aggravates it, it inflames [it]... it always produces death.

Earlier he had said: But 'we have been set free from this tendency of the law to aggravate our problem... We have now been delivered from the law'. In short:

We have been freed for ever from the law which condemned us, and which became to us 'the law of sin and death'. We have been freed from that by this new ministration, 'the ministration of grace', 'the ministration of the Spirit', 'the ministration of glory'... and all because 'we are in Christ Jesus'. 'The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death'.<sup>10</sup>

Any comment of mine would be superfluous. So much for the 'few words'.

So, why have I gone into all this? Why have I been exploring 'the law' in this way? The reason is that unless we rightly know how to interpret the old covenant, we shall go sadly astray. Believers must read the old covenant through new-covenant glasses, and then give themselves to it in their lives. That is what I have been trying to argue with respect to 'the law'.

And this is the approach that we must adopt in the matter of 'priesthood'. This is the way we must apply the principles of the priesthood of the Levites to that of believers.

Take the psalmist (was it David?) who resolved:

I will go into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay my vows, which my lips have uttered and my mouth has spoken when I was in trouble. I will offer you burnt sacrifices of fat animals, with the sweet aroma of rams; I will offer bulls with goats (Ps. 66:13-15).

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<sup>10</sup> Lloyd-Jones: *Romans 7* pp85-87,287-294.

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If the psalmist, who was not a priest(?) could say such a thing under the old covenant, can believers not express the spiritual equivalent under the new? Within New Testament limits, of course they can and should. I know there are differences of interpretation, but see Psalm 99:6 in this regard. Is it not interesting, to put it no stronger, that, according to the NKJV, AV, NASB and NIV, Moses was a priest?

So, once again, Watts was right, this time setting Psalm 132 in new-covenant language. This is the spirit in which we should read this Old Testament passage:

*Where shall we go to seek and find  
A habitation for our God,  
A dwelling for th'eternal mind,  
Among the sons of flesh and blood?*

*The God of Jacob chose the hill  
Of Zion for his ancient rest;  
And Zion is his dwelling still,  
His church is with his presence blessed.*

*'Here will I fix my gracious throne,  
And reign for ever', saith the Lord;  
'Here shall my power and love be known,  
And blessings shall attend my word'.*

*'Here will I meet the hungry poor,  
And fill their souls with living bread;  
Sinners that wait before my door,  
With sweet provision shall be fed'.*

*'Girded with truth, and clothed with grace,  
My priests, my ministers, shall shine.  
Not Aaron in his costly dress  
Made an appearance so divine'.*

*'The saints, unable to contain  
Their inward joys, shall shout and sing;  
The Son of David here shall reign,  
And Zion triumph in her King'.*

*'Jesus shall see a num'rous seed  
Born here t'uphold his glorious name;  
His crown shall flourish on his head,  
While all his foes are clothed with shame'.*



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Note in particular verse 5 linked with verse 6:

*'Girded with truth, and clothed with grace,  
My priests, my ministers shall shine.  
Not Aaron in his costly dress  
Made an appearance so divine.  
The saints, unable to contain  
Their inward joys, shall shout and sing'.*

See my forthcoming *The Pastor: Does He Exist?* for my arguments for interpreting 'my ministers' far wider than 'ordained' preachers. Whatever Watts intended by the phrase, I am talking, as the New Testament does, about *all* believers being priests or ministers. That is why I so strongly link the opening of verse 6 with verse 5.

John Newton surely got it right:

*Blest inhabitants of Zion,  
Washed in the Redeemer's blood!  
Jesus, whom their souls rely on,  
Makes them kings and priests to God.  
'Tis his love his people raises,  
Over self to reign as kings,  
And as priests, his solemn praises  
Each for a thank-offering brings.*

'His people', 'each'... these are the 'blest inhabitants of Zion'; these believers, all of them, each of them, are 'kings and priests to God'.

In quoting these hymns, I do not for a moment pretend that the present state of the churches is an adequate reflection of such figures of speech. That caveat, however, applies to many of the professions, both personal and corporate, we repeatedly make in our hymns, and elsewhere. But it would be a pretty dismal hymn book, would it not, if it contained nothing but the declaration of our low spiritual condition, the poverty of our worship and service for God, the chaotic state of the churches, and such like. Granted the poor spiritual condition of most of us and our churches today, even so we must bear in mind that we are not unique in this respect. This gospel age, even at its best, never has been, nor ever can be, the complete fulfilment of the prophecies of the gospel. Only in the eternal age will things be perfect. Nevertheless, it must be right to continue to profess such glorious things in our hymns –

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notwithstanding the fact that, at times, they amount to little more than heartfelt aspirations. Who knows? As we sing, by God's grace our hearts might be moved to desire more earnestly the things we profess, and our experience more closely to conform to the biblical glories of the gospel.

Well, reader, I said there are two questions. That, such as it is, is my answer to the first. I am convinced it is right to take the principles of the levitical old-covenant priesthood and apply them in a spiritual sense to the priesthood of all believers under the new covenant, all as far as the New Testament will take us – and no further. This is what I intend to do in this present work. As I have explained, in further justification of my approach, especially with regard to showing how the New Testament interprets the Old Testament prophets (1 Pet. 1:9-12), please see my forth-coming book on the law.

Now for the second question: What should we make of the fewness of the number of direct scriptural references to 'the priesthood of all believers'? Is it such an important principle after all?

### ***Why are there so few direct scriptural references to 'the priesthood of all believers'? And what should we do about it?***

My answer is blunt: I have no idea! I have no idea why there are so few direct scriptural references to 'the priesthood of all believers'. It is a fact. But, even so, I do not see that we should have 'to do anything about it'.

The two references in 1 Peter 2, of course, are primary. And we have Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6. Some would say that those last three passages are prophetic, and therefore do not refer to the priesthood which believers exercise today. I am not of that opinion, myself.

So that leaves us with five *direct* references. (I will show that, in addition, there are some *indirect* references). Even so, it is true to say that there are certain places in the New Testament where, one would have thought, the writer would have called upon this doctrine. Take the letter to the Hebrews, as a prime example. But, I

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have to admit, the writer did not seem to make as much of the comparison with the levitical priesthood as I am going to do. I cannot gainsay the point. Nevertheless, the argument is not altogether convincing – if it is then said that such silence means that we should not make much of the teaching. I would not care to try that line of reasoning, for example, on the doctrine of justification by faith. After all, nothing is said, directly, about justification by faith in many books of the New Testament; neither the word nor its derivatives appear in 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians or Hebrews, for instance. But nobody would suggest, surely, that this means that we should play down the doctrine of justification by faith? And what about the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper? What about 'the law of Christ'? And what about 'new covenant'? Paul uses the phrase only twice (1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6). As I have pointed out, 'ten commandments' appears only three times in the whole of Scripture. And so on.<sup>11</sup>

But, as I say, it is not only the general shortage of references to the priesthood of believers which comes into this. It is noticeable that the New Testament writers do not draw on the principle when they come to their 'one another' passages. Now, as I will show, the priesthood of all believers plays a vital role in this corporate aspect of church life. Yet the New Testament writers, as I say, do not make the explicit connection in this regard. Though I cannot explain this, I think, at the very least, we should bear the point in mind when we come to the relevant sections in what follows, and not push the parallels too far.

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<sup>11</sup> As I have argued in my *Baptist Sacramentalism*, the only major apostolic passage dealing with water baptism is 1 Cor. 1:13-17. As for the Lord's supper, apart from its institution by Christ, we have only 1 Cor. 10:16-17,21; 11:17-34. For 'the law of Christ', we have only 1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2. I am not saying there are no other passages where such matters occur, but these are the only direct key-references. As for 'new covenant', in addition to the two Pauline references, Jeremiah's prophecy and the institution of the Lord's supper, we have only Heb. 8:8,13; 9:15; 12:24. Allusions to it abound, of course, but the fact remains that direct references to 'new covenant' are pretty limited.

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There is one area, in particular, where we must bear it in mind. What am I talking about? Sacerdotalism, that's what. In thinking about the priesthood of all believers, we must steer well clear of all sacerdotalist notions. Steer clear of sacerdotalism? *We must avoid it like the plague.* The old covenant, as I have shown, was heavily sacerdotalist, and rightly so, with its God-given levitical priesthood. In the new covenant, Christ is a true representative priest for his people, having offered his one sacrifice on their behalf. *But this principle of sacerdotalism most definitely does not come over into the priesthood of believers.* Let me say that again. It needs repeating. The sacerdotalism of both the levitical priesthood, and the priesthood of Christ, does not transfer to the priesthood of all believers. A massive proportion of the letter to the Hebrews, for instance, is taken up with the application of the principles of the levitical priesthood to Christ. That which applied to the old-covenant priest applies to Christ in a spiritual sense, since the levitical priesthood was an earthly shadow of Christ's heavenly priesthood. But the relative silence in such an application to the priesthood of all believers should not be missed, and must not be ignored. I am convinced that, at the very least, it should serve as a warning to keep us free of sacerdotalism.

Sacerdotalism? What is this? How does it show itself day to day? Men are sacerdotalists when they delegate their worship into the hands of others, who they feel are better able, more qualified, to carry it out for them. In such a system, worship is a specialised task best left to a special class – priests. Hence has arisen the unbiblical notion of the clergy and the laity. But in the new covenant there is no justification for sacerdotalism, or any notion of clergy and laity. The priesthood of all believers, as interpreted by the New Testament, certainly gives no warrant for sacerdotalism or its twin sister, sacramentalism. Sacramentalism? The idea that certain men can convey grace to others by their actions. I know Rome claims the priesthood of all believers justifies both errors. But, as so often, Rome is wrong.

Do not, however, run away with the idea that sacramentalism and sacerdotalism are confined to Romanists. Far from it! The Reformers went badly astray at this point. Grievously clinging to the sacramental doctrine and practice they inherited from the

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Fathers and the medieval Church, time and again they had their backs to the wall, trying to fend off Roman taunts and challenges over the issue. Unsurprisingly, they were not always successful; unsurprising, since both sides were so strongly wedded to the Fathers and the medieval.<sup>12</sup> Calvin might justly warn Edward VI that the popish rooks would return to the nests which the English Reformers were leaving in the Church of England, but his words have come back again and again to bite the Reformed churches. In my *Infant Baptism Tested*, I have fully documented the evidence, showing how sacramentalism has reared its head among the Reformed – starting with Calvin, through the time of the Puritans, the Westminster Assembly documents, right down to the present-day advocates of the Federal Vision. And sacerdotalism is not a million miles removed from sacramentalism.

And all this applies to more than the Reformed! Many evangelicals, dissenters, nonconformists, Baptists... like their bit of sacerdotalism. Oh yes they do! As I have shown in my *Baptist Sacramentalism*, in recent years the weeds of sacramentalism and sacerdotalism have taken root and are growing vigorously in such unlikely fields.

The point is, in using the old covenant to illustrate the priesthood of all believers, we must not push the comparison beyond its proper, scriptural limit, and so let either error get a look in. In particular, this caveat must not be forgotten when we come to think about the corporate aspects of the priesthood of all believers.

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<sup>12</sup> The real ‘grievous’ is that so many who have followed Calvin have failed to heed John Robinson’s final sermon to those who were sailing from Delft Haven in 1620: ‘I am confident the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word. I bewail the state and condition of the Reformed churches, who have come to a full-stop in religion, and will go no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn beyond what Luther saw; the Calvinists, they stick where Calvin left them. This is a misery much to be lamented; for though they were shining lights in their times, yet God did not reveal his whole will unto them, and if they were alive today they would be as ready to and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received’ (see David Fountain: *The ‘Mayflower’ Pilgrims and Their Pastor*, Henry E. Walter Ltd., Worthing, 1970, pp40-41).

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I have not finished with showing that ‘the priesthood of all believers’ is found in more places than the ‘five references’, but let me – by appearing to get ahead of myself – take the matter further by looking into the consequences of the doctrine. I do it because this will demonstrate that ‘priesthood’, or something very like it, occurs in the New Testament more often than is realised, far more often than the ‘five references’. And these ‘indirect occurrences’ speak volumes.

### ***‘The priesthood of all believers’ – the consequences***

As I will show, this priesthood of all believers has privileges for those whom Christ has redeemed. But... as well as privileges, certain *consequences* follow for those whom God saved by his Son whom he ordained as priest; that is, for his elect. In eternity, God chose them, and decreed to save them. By his Spirit, he brought them to everlasting salvation through faith in the merits of his Son and his one effectual sacrifice of himself. And, having thus been brought to salvation, believers have an obligation to glorify their Redeemer. Scripture leaves us in no doubt about the fact. For instance, having spelled out the benefits of God’s saving grace, this is how the writer to the Hebrews introduces those consequences for believers:

Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, his flesh, and having a high priest over the house of God, let us... let us... let us... (Heb. 10:19-25).

‘Let us’. Please note the triple ‘let us’. ‘Let us’ is the preface to certain consequences which follow directly from the saving work of Christ, from the priesthood of Christ, and those consequences follow for all those who are members of the new covenant. Nor has the writer finished with his use of ‘let us’ (Heb. 12:1,28; 13:13,15). (In addition to his other exhortations and commands, see his ‘let us’ in Heb. 4:1,11,14,16; 6:1).

Paul, in his turn, puts it like this:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable [spiritual] service (Rom. 12:1).

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And the apostle works this out in detail as he completes his letter to the Romans (Rom. 12:1 – 16:27). In other words, following their conversion, in their conversion, God appoints believers to serve him as sacrificing priests – both the ‘sacrificing’ and the ‘priests’ to be understood in properly defined limits, of course. But God appoints all the converted to this work. All of them! Hence the priesthood of *all* believers.

Now for another ‘indirect reference’ to the priesthood of all believers. Paul again, this time writing to the Ephesians:

By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10).

Telling believers that they are God’s ‘workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works’, ties in with telling them that they are priests. How? Notice that it is not long after saying the above that the apostle is talking to the Ephesians – *the Ephesians*, I repeat, mostly non-Jews – about Israel, and using expressions such as being ‘brought near... access... a holy temple in the Lord... boldness and access with confidence’. Hence ‘priests’. And, as I say, *all* believers are! And, as priests, they all have certain obligations laid upon them. They have sacrifices to offer.

The same sacrificial, priestly overtones can be detected in other passages too: ‘The grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus... with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit’ (Rom. 15:15-16, NIV).<sup>13</sup> Again, in the question of giving practical relief to the believers in Jerusalem, the apostle was delighted to record that the Corinthians ‘first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God’ (2 Cor. 8:5). ‘Gave’ themselves? The word is translated ‘offer’ in ‘to *offer* a sacrifice’ (Luke 2:24), and in ‘that he should *offer* it... upon the golden altar’ (Rev. 8:3). In other words, the Corinthians ‘offered’

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<sup>13</sup> I will have more to say on this passage – it has to be properly understood, otherwise it could easily be warped into making the apostle say something he did not.

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themselves to God as a sacrifice. And Paul described their gift as ‘the act of grace... the offering’ (2 Cor. 8:6,19, NIV), literally ‘this grace’ (compare AV, NKJV, NASB), being ‘ministered’ (see 1 Pet. 1:12; 4:10). Again: ‘Walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma’ (Eph. 5:2). Paul could tell the Philippians: ‘If I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all’. He later spoke of their gift to him, ‘the things sent from you’, as ‘a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God’ (Phil. 2:17; 4:18; see Lev. 1:9). He told Timothy: ‘I am already being poured out as a drink offering’ (2 Tim. 4:6). Finally, the writer to the Hebrews: ‘Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased’ (Heb. 13:15-16, NIV).

These are sacrificial, priestly terms. None of them use the phrase ‘the priesthood of all believers’. None of them say: ‘Because you are priests, therefore offer...’. The reference to ‘the priesthood of all believers’ is indirect, yes. *But it is there*. And since such sacrificial, offering, priestly words are addressed to all believers, I think we are justified in saying the doctrine is more common in the New Testament than might appear by the ‘five references’.

Not, of course, that believers are priests who offer sacrifices for sin. Perish the thought! As I have already explained, Christ is the only priest who has ever offered the one effectual sacrifice, and that of himself. Ever since his death and resurrection, there is no more sacrifice for sin: ‘There is no longer an offering for sin’ (Heb. 10:18). In his one sacrifice, he fulfilled and abolished the entire Jewish sacrificial system of the old covenant. No, the priesthood which encompasses all believers is a priesthood, not *for* their salvation *but because they are saved*; not to obtain salvation, but to serve their Saviour. And this, reader, is what I want to go on to examine in more detail in this volume now in your hands – ‘the priesthood of all believers’.

But before we get to that, we must take note of the way in which this biblical principle – ‘the priesthood of all believers’ –



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has been ruined. Ruined? Yes, indeed. I have hinted at it in passing, but it is time we thought about it a little more deeply.

### ***‘The priesthood of all believers’ – a ruined principle***

‘The priesthood of all believers’. Sadly, Satan has taken and marred every last biblical doctrine and practice, ruining, distorting, twisting all of God’s revelation. And he has done it to the eternal ruin of millions. In particular, he has laid his meddling fingers on ‘the priesthood of all believers’.

How? How has Satan taken *this* glorious gospel principle and twisted it to ruin so many souls?

For a start, the overwhelming majority of believers, for all practical purposes, believe in *the priesthood of no believers*. Oh, I know we frequently parrot the phrase ‘the priesthood of all believers’, and, of course, it features in most of our Confessions of Faith: ‘We believe in the priesthood of all believers’. Oh, yes. But too often it has become a mere slogan, a mantra. A form of words without real content or implication, it makes no practical difference to most of us whatsoever. The result is tragic. ‘The priesthood of all believers’ is a neglected, poor relation of the Christian religion, rarely discussed, let alone thought about, least of all acted upon. ‘The priesthood of *no* believers’ is the reality for many, I am afraid. And for those who do have some concept of it, too frequently we think of it as an individual thing, a personal thing – I can go directly to God for myself. A wonderful truth, of course, but ‘the priesthood of all believers’ has a wider remit even than that. And that leads me on to the next point.

It gets worse. Worse? Yes, indeed. Millions really believe in *the priesthood of some believers*. The truth is, where this is so, in each church it has become *the priesthood of one believer!* Really? Yes, it has, for millions, adherents of the Church of Rome and the Church of England, chief among them. But not only they! No, indeed! Most evangelicals (not excluding the Reformed) hold to the priesthood of *some* believers. Oh, yes they do! When they describe and define certain men among them by using such highfalutin titles (and so break Christ’s express command; see Matt. 23:1-12) as reverend, pastor, minister, and the like, when

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they look upon them as an ordained set-apart clerical class, which they often do, they are in danger, to put it no stronger, of believing in the priesthood of *some* believers. I will not stop now to answer the objection that ‘pastor’ and ‘minister’ are biblical words, since I am in process of producing a work in which I show how these words are abused. And abused they are! What I am talking about is the high road to sacerdotalism, to which I have already referred.

‘The priesthood of all believers’ describes not only our individual experience; it plays a vital role in the corporate life of believers, the church. Notice how Peter expresses it: Believers, ‘as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (1 Pet. 2:5). The ‘stones’ are, in the first instance, individual; they are individual believers. The truth is, each believer is a ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor. 6:19). But one of the glories of the new covenant is that these individual believers, these individual stones, are all fitted together by God, the great master-builder, to form a spiritual house, a spiritual temple (1 Cor. 3:9; Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:22; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6). And believers, all believers, who form this temple, are, all of them, the priests who offer the spiritual sacrifices to God within that temple. Hence the corporate or collective nature of ‘the priesthood of all believers’.

Moreover, while it is true that all believers, everywhere, constitute this one universal temple, we can only *sensibly* experience the manifestation of this corporate spiritual priesthood within the local assemblies of God’s people – in each particular church, in every separate church. Every believer, therefore, has a privileged part to play in this local expression of the communal ‘priesthood of *all* believers’ – each believer being a living stone in the temple and, at the same, time, one of the priests sacrificing within that temple. What is more, each believer is at the same time part of the sacrifice (Rom. 12:1). And all of it is ‘living’ – ‘living’ stones, a ‘living’ sacrifice, in the temple of the ‘living’ God, the church of the ‘living’ God, in the city of the ‘living’ God, serving the ‘living’ and true God, all through a new and ‘living’ way, founded on Christ the ‘living’ stone (Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 10:20; 12:22; 1 Pet. 2:4-5). Living!

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We are not talking about a mechanical organisation, but an organism, a living body. And ‘the priesthood of all believers’ plays an integral part, a vital part, a ‘living’ part, in it all. How we need to re-capture this!

I admit, at once, that the parallel with the levitical priesthood breaks down here. *But this is the point.* In the old covenant, in the levitical priesthood, it was ‘a priesthood of the few for the many’. In the new covenant, it is ‘the priesthood of *all* believers’.

I say the parallel breaks down, and so it does, but, let us never forget, even in the old covenant there was an over-arching communal aspect to ‘priesthood’. God regarded Israel – *as a people* – as ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Ex. 19:6), and this vital aspect of the Sinai covenant undergirds 1 Peter 2:9 and Revelation 1:6; 6:10. This, yet again, enhances the fact that, while there is a clear individual aspect to ‘the priesthood of all believers’, there is a corporate aspect also.

Consequently, when believers in reality believe in the priesthood of *some* believers – which, sad to say, is far from uncommon – they are, in effect, going back to the concept of the old covenant as worked out in the levitical priesthood, and, in doing this, they are losing a far-reaching new-covenant principle, with all its attendant blessings.

Let me spell it out. Not the least mark in the decline in traditional church life today is the almost total lack of understanding, let alone practice, of an ‘all-body ministry’, as described, say, in such passages as Romans 12:3-8; 15:14; 1 Corinthians 1:4-7; 12:4-31; 14:1-40; Galatians 6:1-2,10; Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11,14; 1 Peter 2:2-5; 4:10-11; Jude 20-23.<sup>14</sup> This is only a sample; the New Testament is replete with the concept. Consider ἀλλήλων, ‘of one another’. Joseph Henry Thayer spoke of ‘reciprocally, mutually’, saying it appears ‘often’ in the New Testament. Jeremy Thomson noted it occurs ‘23 times

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<sup>14</sup> I fully acknowledge that a growing number of individuals and churches are thinking about these matters, and trying to put them into practice. My experience, however, is largely among traditional churches where things, it seems to me, are as I have described.

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in the letters in sections of admonition'.<sup>15</sup> Many churches today, paying no attention to such facts, are little more than preaching centres spiced with social networking – or *vice-versa*; increasingly, I think, the *vice-versa*. And as for the spiritual, too often, believers are content to watch ‘the pastor’, or the elders, or some specially dedicated people, see to that side of things, while they engage, if they engage at all, in the social round of the church. In fact, most church members are, in effect, little more than spectators when it comes to the spiritual life of the church. They are happy not to think things through for themselves, but to leave church policy and decisions to the hierarchy above them. The ‘rubber stamp’, however, is *not* a New Testament picture of the believer in the local assembly.

It gets worse. Unwilling to think through Scripture for themselves – or not expecting or expected to think through Scripture for themselves – many believers ask no questions, discuss no spiritual issues. As for those who do, not infrequently they can find themselves dismissed as ‘trouble-makers’. And that is not the end of it, as I will show.

In saying this, I am not trying to stir up needless discontent in Christ’s churches. Rather, I want to do what I can to encourage believers to go back to the New Testament in these matters. Spiritual passivity, which leads to the surrender of spiritual thought and activity to a specially-devoted individual or group, is quite wrong. It is nothing other than having a ‘clergy’. And I make no bones about it: I am pointing the finger both at the system *and* the people who like it.

Furthermore, it must be obvious that when I speak against restricting the priesthood to a few, to some sort of clergy, I am not confining my remarks to Romanists or Anglicans. Far from it! The fault can be found much closer to home, despite ingenious attempts to disguise it by nonconformist verbiage. Although it is easy to see how Spurgeon was not always consistent in this area, in this extract, at least, he pressed the right button:

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament...*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1991; Jeremy Thomson: *Preaching as Dialogue: Is the Sermon a Sacred Cow?*, Grove Books, Cambridge, 2003, pp7-8.

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There are many, alas! too many who make a dissenting minister as much their priest as the Catholic makes his priest his helper... Oh, take care [beware] of priestcraft, take care of mancraft, of ministercraft, of clergycraft. All God's people are clergy... There never ought to have been a distinction between clergy and laity.<sup>16</sup>

And all the time, the New Testament teaches the priesthood of *all* believers. Scripture *does* know of a clergy-laity split. *But not in the New Testament*. In the Old Testament, yes, but not in the New. Why, the phrase 'the lay people' is actually used in 2 Chronicles 35:5,13 (NKJV, NASB, NIV – not verse 13), as distinct from the priests. Quite right, too. There was a clergy-laity split in the old covenant. *But not in the new*.

In saying this, of course, I am not denying the patent biblical principle that God has set apart certain brothers for public preaching and teaching, and directed that they should receive financial support in the discharge of that ministry. Not at all. How could I deny it? I wouldn't dream of doing such a foolish thing. It is written large in Scripture. Not only that. I have myself participated in it for over 50 years. Nevertheless, the unbiblical – but almost ubiquitous – emphasis upon 'the minister' or 'the pastor' has done much to undermine the vital biblical principle of 'the priesthood of all believers'. This must be put right. And this book is another part of my contribution towards that.<sup>17</sup>

In short, one of my aims in publishing this work is to help some believers avoid a trap we almost-routinely seem to fall into. I include myself in this. What 'trap' is that? I want us to stop intoning the phrase 'the priesthood of all believers', and then, having touched our cap at it, carrying on as though it meant nothing at all. In short, I want us to use the phrase, understand what it means, *and then live it out in daily experience*.

And there's another thing. It is important to remember that we are *not* talking about 'the priesthood of *each* believer'. We are, of course – in the sense that each believer, as an individual, is a priest. But we are talking about 'the priesthood of *all* believers'; that is to say, we are dealing with the issue both individually *and*

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<sup>16</sup> *New Park Street Pulpit... 1857*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1964, pp268-269. I will return to this vital matter.

<sup>17</sup> See my other works.

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*corporately*. Note the ‘and’; both individually *and* corporately. It is not either/or. It is both. The idea that the believer is a kind of spiritual Lone Ranger, some sort of loose cannon, is quite foreign to the New Testament. This point must be grasped. We need to recover the corporate aspect of the Christian life – the church, in particular. Note, for instance, the plurals in the apostle’s commands and exhortations to the believers in Ephesus.<sup>18</sup> I must confess that, in writing this, I have come to see that I have failed sufficiently to develop the ‘us’-mentality when reading Scripture. I am not for a moment suggesting that we should drop the personal approach. That would be daft, utterly wrong! The personal is primary! Without personal experience, we have nothing. But, in giving the individual experience, let us not forget the corporate.

Of course, reader, if you are *not* a believer – I must be blunt – what follows – on ‘the priesthood of all believers’ – has nothing to do with you. Obviously so! You are not a believer, and I am writing about ‘the priesthood of all *believers*’. You must take hold of that phrase by its tail. ‘The priesthood of all *believers*’. ‘Believers’ is the word for you. You must *believe*. You need to *believe*. And by ‘believe’ I mean ‘trust’. You need to go to God at once through the great high priest whom he has ordained – his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. You need to turn from your sin, repent of your sin, and trust the merits of his person and his one final sacrifice for sin. Trust him for yourself. And do so now. Christ is the one and only priest who has ever offered the one effectual sacrifice. Effectual? I should say! In what must be one of the most phenomenal of all Bible statements we read:

For by one offering he has perfected for ever those who are being sanctified [or made holy] (Heb. 10:14).

Trust Christ and his sacrifice, and you will be saved at once and for ever – saved, perfected for ever. But unless you repent, trust Christ and his sacrifice, you will perish. ‘Unless you repent you will...

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<sup>18</sup> William Hendriksen helpfully distinguished the singular (you, your) from the plural (y o u, y o u r). See William Hendriksen: *Ephesians*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1976, pp149-286.

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perish' (Luke 13:3). 'Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor. 6:2). 'Today' (Heb. 3:7 – 4:11). Now!

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isa. 55:6-7).

And if you do... why, then you, too, will be a believer, you will be saved from your sin. Then... having trusted Christ as your priest, and having rested in his finished sacrifice for your sins, you, too, will be a priest of God – you, too, will be privileged to play your part in 'the priesthood of all believers'. And may I suggest you go back and start this book all over again, now that your position before God has so radically been changed?

But for those who do have a living faith in Christ, let us now go on to explore the privileges and responsibilities which God, in the Bible, lays upon his people as priests under the new covenant.

So, the priesthood of all believers. What does Scripture tell us about this sadly neglected topic? Let us open our Bibles and together explore this teaching – teaching which the apostle felt precious and important enough to remind suffering believers about. Let me say at once that I do not undertake this task because I have reached the standard myself. Far from it! I am only too conscious of my shortcomings in these matters. What I say by way of instruction and challenge, I say to myself as much as to you, reader. Indeed, I say it to myself first.

But I am glad I find the standard way above my attainment. Let me explain. I read the Bible and try, by the help of God's Spirit, to determine what God is teaching me, and the practical consequences which follow. If I were to find this to come well within my grasp, it would not be the doctrine of God, nor his practical demands, that I would have discovered. In other words, if I *could fully* grasp the doctrine, if I *could easily* obey its consequences, neither the doctrine, nor its consequences, could possibly be of God! Surely God's doctrines and God's demands ultimately must rise far above my ability as a sinner to grasp or obey. So I am not at all surprised by finding that 'the priesthood of all believers', and its consequences, embrace more than my mind

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can *fully* comprehend or my experience can *fully* match. I am glad that God in Scripture sets out perfection in doctrine, and demands perfection in practice. Of course, therefore, I fall short. We all do. This is part of being a sinner – missing the mark (Rom. 3:23). Unworthy servants are we, all of us, while here below. Nevertheless, we must strive for perfection (Phil. 3:12), even though it is the man Christ Jesus alone who has attained (and could or can attain) perfection on earth. Perfection for us will have to wait until we have reached the eternal glory.

So let me repeat myself. I am not saying these things about the priesthood of all believers because I have reached the lofty heights of attainment! How any believer can face with equanimity such scriptures as the following, I know not:

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48, NIV; see also AV and NASB).<sup>19</sup>

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).

Surely such texts challenge us. And more. They remind us how far we have to go. To read them, to ponder them, to let their demand sink in, is a reproof in itself.

One of the saddest illustrations of the weakness of present-day preaching came to my notice even as I was writing this. A friend of mine heard a leading Grace Baptist minister preach Romans 12:1, just mentioned. My friend's greatest criticism was that he came away unscathed from a sermon on such a text. Of course, my friend's attitude may have been at fault, and maybe the preacher did apply the verse in the spirit of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (see below) – which includes 'rebuke' and 'correction' – and my friend failed to get it. But, to my mind, it is not unknown for the pulpit to be willing to supply what the people want. Which is? In my

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<sup>19</sup> The NKJV, 'you shall be perfect', badly misses the thrust of Christ's words; badly, I say.



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experience, in any public prayer before the service, request is made for the sermon to be ‘encouraging’ and ‘comforting’ – which, of course, it should be – but rarely do people pray (in public, at least) that they might be ‘rebuked’ or ‘corrected’. In any case, how many realise that ‘comfort’, in New Testament terms, includes the notion of ‘backbone’?

Getting back to the sermon in question, not many of us, surely, should be able to come away from Romans 12:1 without feeling that we have some room for improvement? I know it ought not to be possible for *me* to come away un-rebuked! With all the comfort we might take away, should we not have at least a modicum of *discomfort* that we have not been as devoted to the Lord as we ought?

Reader, whatever else is said about this volume in your hand, let it not be thought toothless. Let it not be put down as ‘nice’ – and ignored. Oh, may that not be its fate!

But I hope my words will not only challenge. After all, the priesthood of all believers is a part of Scripture. And, as we know, God gave us his word, not only to challenge, but to do much more:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NIV).

May God, through our study of ‘the priesthood of all believers’, lead us to discover these benefits. May he, by his Spirit, enable us to enjoy that rich encouragement, and to delight in that enhanced sense of privilege which comes to true believers from a greater understanding – and experience – of this doctrine.