

“Reclaiming our Priesthood”
1 Peter 2:2-10
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A number of years ago I had a memorable conversation with the older of my two sisters. Jeni was thirteen at the time, I was in seminary and on staff at Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and I had come over to my parents’ house for dinner.

Going to a Catholic school and understanding ministry from that perspective, and being preoccupied with the things which preoccupy thirteen-year-olds, Jeni said, “Bo (the name my sisters call me), I don’t understand! Why do you want to be a priest? Don’t you want to get married like other people and have a family?”

After recovering from my initial state of shock, I replied, “Jeni, you don’t understand. I am a Baptist minister, not a Catholic Priest. It is ‘O.K.’ for me to marry like other people and have a family.” For just a moment, she looked at me as if maybe I wasn’t quite as crazy as she had thought, but that moment passed very quickly.

Over the years, I have thought about that conversation and realized that in her naivete, my sister spoke for many on the topic of priesthood. The Bible describes priesthood as a noble calling, Baptists claim to believe in what we call the Priesthood of All Believers, but the reality is we have very little understanding of the role, other than how it is defined by one tradition, and so we tend to run from it as fast as we can.

That is a shame because priesthood is a marvelous privilege and a tremendous responsibility. Priesthood is a part of our heritage as Christians and Baptists. And in many ways, reclaiming our priesthood lies at the very heart of what is needed to revitalize our faith.

We begin to reclaim our priesthood by appreciating the biblical perspective that all believers are priests. The perspective has roots in the Hebrew Bible. Exodus 19:6 refers to Israel as a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. But it finds its clearest expression in several Christian

Testament passages, including the verses we have read today from 1 Peter 2 wherein the church is described as both a holy priesthood and a royal priesthood. It is one image among many the author uses to describe the church, but the image applies to the whole church.

While in the Old Covenant there is a special class of priests who have the privilege of entering further into the presence of God and the responsibility of making sacrifices for others, in the New Covenant there is no such special class. While the Roman and Orthodox Churches have established special orders of priests, in the Christian Testament all believers are priests; all have equal access to God through Christ, the Great High Priest, who made the once-for-all sacrifice (Hebrews 4:14f; 9:23f); all stand on level ground before the cross.

It is an idea that lies at the very center of our heritage as Baptists. The teaching that every believer relates directly to God in Christ and thus requires no human priest to go through was central to the Reformation as a whole. Martin Luther said every Christian is a priest, directly meeting Christ and directly being Christ to others. Among the reformers, however, Baptists may have taken the idea most seriously.

Thus, it was incredibly ironic when the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in San Antonio, Texas, in 1988 passed a resolution devaluing the priesthood of the believer and elevating the authority of the pastor, referencing Hebrews 13:17 which says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them..." It was one of the last straws for churches like ours who know our history as a people.

Paul Duke, who was then pastor of Kirkwood Baptist Church in St. Louis, Missouri, wrote this tongue-in-cheek response to the resolution.

From now on, things are going to be different at Kirkwood Baptist Church. For nearly 118 years now, you people have had the audacity to think for yourselves. At times, you've been so disrespectful as to differ from your pastor's viewpoints. You have stubbornly refused to agree that your preacher and teachers are always right, subversively studying the scriptures for yourselves. When your leaders have suggested directions for change, you've had the arrogance to ask questions and to make alternative

suggestions. Well, at long last, you've been put in your place. The Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in San Antonio last week, has ruled you out of order... Those nice people were kind enough to legislate me some pastoral authority! Stick that in your Bible and smoke it! I've got you now, you heretics! Disagree with me now and I'll throw The Book at you, I'll stamp Hebrews 13:17 on your foreheads, I'll call you a bunch of skunks! Now we'll start having a little respect around here. Somebody buy me a white suit! Kiss my ring! Where's my crown?

I hope you appreciate Paul's sarcasm and wit, but I also hope you appreciate the seriousness of his concern. Baptists have always maintained that all believers are priests. Baptists have celebrated the freedom of all to study scripture and have a voice in church life. Baptists have needed pastoral leaders, but never viewed these leaders to have the final word on any matter. This church has functioned this way for over 205 years. Whenever anyone tries to sell our birthright at this point, we have a sacred responsibility to preserve our heritage.

But even if we hold on to the belief that all believers are priests, what exactly does this mean? If we are to reclaim this role, we need to understand what it involves. From the biblical perspective, there are two sides of priesthood – the privilege side and the responsibility side. As Martin Luther put it, every Christian is a priest, directly meeting Christ and directly being Christ to others. A part of the story is that we have equal access to God, but another part is that we have equal responsibility to bridge the gap between God and others. Our tendency is to get stuck on the privilege side of the equation.

The first thing many in our tradition think of in regard to priesthood is that every believer has access to God and this is part of the story. In the Old Covenant, the priest alone had full access to God. In fact, only the High Priest had access to the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the temple in Jerusalem, and only one day of the year, the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. When the author of 1 Peter says that the church is a holy and royal priesthood, he speaks as one who knows

what the term implies. He is saying that all believers have access to God, the privilege, through Christ, of drawing near to God.

This is our belief. We believe that all have equal access to God. We believe that all are free to read and interpret scripture for themselves under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We believe that we are all directly responsible to God. As a pastor, I teach and preach and present my understanding of the Bible and Christian faith, which is based upon prayerful study and discernment in addition to many years of formal education and training, but you are always free to disagree with me, encouraged to think for yourself, to understand and believe for yourself.

But this is only part of the story, part of the story is about direct access to God; the other part is about serving as a bridge between others and God. In the Old Covenant, the priest certainly had access to God, but not for himself alone. He used his access to offer prayers and sacrifices on behalf of others.

When the author of 1 Peter speaks of the church as a holy and royal priesthood, he understands this as well. He says that the purpose of the church's calling as priests is to proclaim the mighty acts of God who has called us out of darkness into light. He is saying that each believer has a responsibility to be a priest for others, to be Christ for others, to bridge the gap between God and others. Time and again, we fulfill this responsibility.

We bridge the gap when we hold our arms around one another in times of grief and not only offer our comfort and companionship, but put a human face on God's love, helping those who might feel distanced from God to realize that God is with them in their suffering.

We bridge the gap when we pray on Wednesday nights and in our Sunday School classes and every day for others in their time of need and ask God to strengthen them and surround them with love.

We bridge the gap when we hear others' confession of struggle and wrongdoing. We may not have a sacrament of confession, but we need to confess our struggles and sins to God and at times to another human being. In our tradition, it doesn't have to be an ordained minister. Any one of us can hear the confession of another, but it happens not because we ask someone to confess to us, but because we need to confess to

another, and we choose who that other is based upon the trust we have in him/her.

There are many ways in which we need each other and serve each other, but whenever and however we bridge the gap, we are fulfilling our responsibility as priests.

There is one other thing we need to note if we are to reclaim our priesthood. We need to know that we are all priests, we need to understand that priesthood involves privilege and responsibility, and then, we need to remember that we are priests because of Christ. It is not our own doing. This is implicit in everything else I have said, but it needs to be explicit. We are able to draw near to God as we are without any human help because of the love and mercy God extends through Christ. And so, not only is he the means through which we become priests, he is the guide for how we exercise our priesthood.

The author clarifies this reality through another image, a related image, the image of the temple. In the Old Covenant, God was present in the temple, the physical structure in Jerusalem. In the New Covenant, God is present within us, the new temple, as each of us is viewed to be a living stone making up a larger spiritual house of people wherein Christ is the cornerstone, the defining piece, the one whose very being orders and directs everything else.

When Rabbi Eric Solomon from Beth Meyer Synagogue was here a few weeks ago on a Wednesday, he told a story that illustrates the role that some pieces play in a physical structure and spiritual community. When I mentioned Hannah Scoggin in the prayer time, Eric realized that Hannah is and Elmo Scoggin was a member here. This prompted a story which connects our two congregations.

Years ago, on a trip or while he lived and taught in Israel, Elmo picked up a brick or stone from the grounds where the Western Wall is in the Old City. It wasn't part of the Wall, but it was on the grounds, and this was years ago because this could not happen now. Anyway, Elmo brought that stone back and gave it to Beth Meyer Synagogue.

It was placed in the middle of a wall in their new sanctuary. It rests among other bricks or stones, and it is clearly different, but still

very much in place. In fact, it may be the most critical stone of all because of its link to the great heritage of Jewish faith, the temple itself, the holy space in the holy city.

We have a stone like that here. It's not a physical stone. It is our cornerstone - Christ, the one who lives and dies and is raised for us. He is our link to all that matters in our heritage. He is the source of our calling to priesthood and the guide in everything we say and do. Thus, things like mercy and compassion direct us. Qualities like kindness and humility shape our actions. Love and justice are our goals, peace and reconciliation are our aims, forgiveness and healing are our daily bread.

Why? Because these are the qualities that shape Jesus' life and ministry. If we are really interested in reclaiming our priesthood, we need not only to realize we are all priests and be willing to claim both the privilege and responsibility that are ours, we need to ground everything we do in the Christ who is our cornerstone. It is by grace that we are a part of God's household in the first place. So, grace is what we extend to others, all others.

Earlier I made the statement that reclaiming our priesthood lies at the very heart of what is needed to revitalize our faith. How does what we have been talking about support this claim? Well, the church's witness grows exponentially when we realize we are all priests. Five or six ministers can only offer so much witness and compassion. Forty-eight deacons have a limit on the ministry they can provide. But hundreds of priests can make a significant difference in a community like ours. And that's what we have sitting in this room right now.

We grow individually only when we take advantage of our priestly privilege of drawing near to God. No one can do this for us, no music can make it happen for us, no sermon can substitute for a personal relationship with God. It is up to each of us to draw close. And rooting our lives and ministry in Christ and allowing him to shape everything we say and do may be the most critical thing we do.

We are royal priesthood, says 1 Peter, a spiritual house made of living stones with Christ as the cornerstone, chosen and precious. When we live up to our name and calling, we are a powerful force for good!