

Christian Identity: Who You Are in Christ

Message 5: Priest/Holy Priesthood

Priests occupy a special class or category of ministers within their church. They are clergymen, they are men ordained to the ministry of the church.

As Baptists, we deeply disagree with the practice of calling ministers priests. One of the most important biblical distinctives of Baptists is the belief that *every* Christian is a priest. The Bible teaches the priesthood of all believers. Every child of God has free access to God through Christ. We don't need another mediator; there is only one mediator and high priest, and this Jesus Christ. In fact, we find it deeply unbiblical and wrong to insert another priest between us and God.

The priesthood of all believers is one of the great doctrines rediscovered during the Reformation, and that idea radically altered the operation of the church. It's also a key Baptist distinctive; Baptists historically have taught this idea. The individual priesthood of the believers is an important element of the Christian identity.

Today we are continuing in our Summer Sermon Series on Christian identity. Thus far, we've looked at the ideas of being made in the image of God, being a child of God, being part of the people of God, and how being "in Christ" affects our identity.

Today we want to consider how being a believer-priest affects our identity.

I. Texts pertaining to the individual priesthood of the believer:

1 Timothy 2:5 *For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*

1 Peter 2:5, 9 *Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. . . . ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people.*

These texts tell us that we don't need a mediator between God and man other than Jesus. They also tell us that believers make up "a royal priesthood." All believers are priests; and if that's true, then we don't need a special class of people called priests. All Christians are priests.

II. Background and definitions:

- A. What is a priest? A priest represents humans before God. He is a mediator or go-between who speaks to God on behalf of people. Priests have a special job; they offer sacrifices to appease God's wrath, gain forgiveness of sins, or express gratitude, praise, or devotion.
- B. Sinful humans need a priest to mediate for them before God. Jesus perfectly satisfies this need. He is both priest and victim. He is both God and man, partaking of both divine and human natures. He offered up himself as the final sacrifice for sin, and he now intercedes for believers (Hebrews 7:25).
- C. Since Jesus now fulfills this role, no one else has authority to stand between God and man. No one else can supplement the work of Christ or improve upon what he has done. No other agent exists who can grant us entry into God's presence.

Quote: Jesus' final sacrifice and his continuing priesthood forbid a separate priesthood that offers up sacrifices for sin. Any system in which a priest other than Jesus stands between humans and God constitutes a usurpation of the priestly office of Christ and a denial of his finished work.¹

If you know anything about the RC priesthood, that's exactly what they claim to do—they stand between God and man; they offer up sacrifices—the mass; they claim to absolve sin. I don't believe they can do any of that.

So it's not merely that we disagree with the idea of priests as clergy; we believe that it is unbiblical and wrong.

Another word for "priest" is "vicar." The pope is known as the vicar of Christ. That means that he substitutes for Christ or is the human representative for Christ. The problem is that the NT does not recognize a priest other than Jesus.

No one other than Christ intercedes for us before God. Cf. Hebrews 10:1-18.

¹ Kevin Bauder, *Baptist Distinctives*, 78. Many of the ideas in this section are based on Bauder's work.

- D. In the OT, the high priest entered the holy of holies only once a year. He was the only one authorized to enter that sacred space. He had special access to God that no one else enjoyed. The OT system employed many priests, and they stood between God and man.

That arrangement lasted until Jesus' death and resurrection. Now we no longer need a high priest; Jesus is our mediator. We don't need a separate priesthood.

- E. The NT calls Jesus our "great high priest" (Heb 4:14). Since Jesus now fulfills the office of priest, no one else stands between us and God.
- F. Believers constitute "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9), and they can now enter boldly into God's presence (Hebrews 4:16, 10:19-22). Each believer now has the high privilege of direct access to God that only the OT high priest enjoyed previously.
- G. One error that people sometimes fall into in this regard is the idea that, because I am a priest, I don't need the church. I have access to God through Christ, so why bother with the church? Obviously, that is not the right attitude to have. Personal access to God's presence does not imply abandonment of the church. The priesthood of the believer does not reduce our responsibility to be part of a church. In fact, we function as priests in the context of the church.

III. What does it mean to be a priest/part of the priesthood?

- A. Each believer has the right of direct access to God.

Under the NT dispensation, there is no need of anyone to stand between man and God. Believers have direct access into the presence of the Lord himself without the need for any mediator or go-between other than Jesus.

Hebrews 4:16 *Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.*

Believers should use this privilege to draw near to God and humbly submit their requests to Him (Philippians 4:6).

- B. Each believer has equal standing before God.

Colossians 3:11 *where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.*

1. Just as every believer is a saint, every believer is a priest. There is no essential difference between the Christian minister and the people he is serving. All believers, those who occupy the pulpit and those who inhabit the pew, stand before God on equal footing.
2. We don't have the office of priest, but we still recognize the offices of pastor and deacon. The pastor is not a priest; I don't stand between you and God. We have direct access to God through Jesus, not through a human priest.
3. We certainly ought to show respect and honor to those in spiritual leadership, but the individual priesthood of the believer shows us that we are all have equal standing before God.
4. When people think of priests, they often think of confession of sin. If you want to confess your sins to me, you can (cf. James 5:16). But I'm not going to absolve you of your sins. I can pray for you, and I can assure you that God has forgiven you of your sins; but I can't take away your sins; I have no power to forgive sins.

C. Each believer is accountable to God for his own life and conduct.

Believers have the responsibility to offer guidance, to rebuke, and to bear the burdens of others. However, no one will be held responsible for the decisions and choices that others make. Final responsibility for choices and conduct rests with the individual. No one will ever be able to blame anyone else for his own choices or conduct.

We all have our own personal relationship with God; we will stand before God in judgment individually. You can't blame anyone else for your bad decisions.

D. Each believer has the obligation of and the opportunity for performing priestly tasks.

Under the OT Mosaic law, priests had the authority to offer up sacrifices for themselves and for others. Thankfully, we don't have to kill animals, divide them up, and place them on altars. What we are responsible for are "spiritual sacrifices." These spiritual services involve at least our praise, our prayer, and our service.

Hebrews 13:15–16 *Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.*

1 Peter 2:5 *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.*

Spiritual sacrifices would be any kind of activity a believer might do in worshipping God or in serving fellow believers, particularly in the context of the church. When you sing, pray, give, encourage others, teach/learn, lead, help, etc., you are offering spiritual sacrifices to God. Even attending church and listening to a long, drawn-out sermon is a spiritual sacrifice.

If you neglect those activities, you are neglecting your work as a priest. When we participate in these things, we are offering them up to God; they are spiritual sacrifices.

On the individual level, we must present our own bodies as “living sacrifices, holy, acceptable unto God” (Romans 12:1-2). The offering of ourselves to God is a form of “reasonable service,” that is, worship. As priests, we offer ourselves to God.

- E. Each believer has the right to interpret the Scriptures for himself.
1. The individual believer has the right to study and to interpret the Bible on his own, for himself.
 2. Our personal interpretations are limited, however. No individual passage of Scripture may be correctly interpreted in a way that would contradict the teaching of the general tone of Scripture. So we are responsible to “rightly divide” the word of truth. As priests, we must properly interpret the Bible.
 3. Further, individuals endanger themselves when they depart from the body of truth as Christians have historically understood it.² Within the confines of these stringent guidelines, believers may read, study, interpret, and apply Scripture as they see fit.

² This does not rule out the occasional reformation movement, when an individual needs to point out the church’s drift away from sound doctrine (e.g., Luther).

- F. No believer has the right to impose beliefs, practices, views, or restrictions on any other Christian unless those matters are specifically mentioned in Scripture or legitimately derived from Scripture. Every mature believer must adopt his own set of standards under the guidance of the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit, his church, and his own conscience.

That means that there will be some differences among people as to how they interpret and apply the Bible in their own lives. We have to allow for flexibility; believer-priests don't necessarily see everything the same way. On some matters, we have to allow differences of opinion and interpretation (cf. Rom 14).

The priesthood of the believer affirms the dignity, calling, privileges, and obligations of all Christians before God. We need no separate class of priests. Every believer is a priest; we all have direct access to God through the person and work of Christ.

As priests, we should be involved in acts of service for God; we are to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God. God holds each individual responsible for his own standards, behaviors, beliefs, and service.

My identity as a priest tells me that I have direct access to God. Jesus Christ is my only mediator, and I can come boldly into God's presence through Christ's intercession. I am responsible to participate in spiritual sacrifices (i.e., worship, service) for the benefit of others and myself.

Do you identify yourself as a priest? If you are a Christian, then that's what you are.

If you are not a Christian, then you are not a priest. Frankly, nothing you do can please or honor God. God will not accept your worship. Nothing you do can appease God's wrath. Only when you turn from sin and trust in Christ can you be rightly related to God. Only through faith in Christ can you become a priest unto God.