

First Peter No. 9 “The Priesthood of All Believers”

1 Peter 2:4-10

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Text Comment

v.8 A strong predestinarian note. We struggle with this – all Christians do, of course, from time to time – but God is God! He works out *everything* according to the purpose of his will. There is much to this effect in the Bible and it is a sentinel posted around the cross – we are not our own Saviors. What is more, if there must be damnation, I much prefer that it be what the all wise and all loving and perfectly just God does, and not ultimately the decision of foolish and feeble human beings, responsible and accountable as they surely are for their unbelief, no matter the divine counsel.

Most of the time when I am composing a sermon from a text of Holy Scripture my challenge is to make a truth once again impressive or to apply a truth already well-known to God’s people. After all, the Bible has only so many themes; it teaches the same doctrine and the same ethics from Genesis to Revelation, and is unembarrassed by massive repetition. *When preaching is faithful to the Word of God there is very little that will surprise a congregation of practiced Christians.* Details may be added, new light may be shone on some facets of a biblical teaching, but Christians expect their ministers to concentrate on subjects with which they are already familiar. New believers hearing sermons may for some time be discovering the content of the Christian faith and the requirements of the Christian life for the first time, but before too long he or she begins to hear the same truth being explained and applied once again. This is, in fact, the great challenge that faces a preacher of the Bible: *how to impress Christians with truth they already know.* What Goethe said is true of the Christian faith in a particularly important way: “Everything has been thought of before; the trick is to think of it again.” That is, what Christians need most of all is to keep present to the mind truth they are very likely to take for granted precisely because they are so familiar with it. One of the primary tasks of the preacher is to keep the great truths of the faith alive in the Christian heart by repetition. But that is a difficult task to fulfill since repetition, unless done particularly well, tends to be boring rather than impressive.

But sometimes the biblical teaching is so foreign to us, so alien to our intellectual and spiritual culture that even if we have heard it before, even if we have some grasp of its meaning, *what is necessary is still a basic understanding of what is being said.* Perhaps *we think we know* what the Bible means, but it is very likely that we do not, or, at least, that we do not really appreciate its meaning. Culture has terrific power over our grasp of ideas, shapes our thinking in ways we barely understand and often fail to realize. How did it happen, for example, that the early church came so easily to believe that a celibate life, especially for ministers, was to be preferred to a married life? So much so that in the blink of an historical eye, it became a law that ministers must remain unmarried – the beginning of a long history of pain and sorrow and sin. Looking back on that history we shake our heads and think it extraordinary that Christians could have been so blind to the obvious and could have been so sure about an important conviction that appears nowhere in the Word of God! But, of course, in that Greco-Roman milieu, the idea seemed obvious to them,

hardly needing demonstration. So with slavery in the church of the American south. We shake our heads, nobody looks back on that history with approval. We think it shameful that the church was involved to the extent that it was in that peculiar institution. How was it not obvious to them that what they were doing was terribly wrong? It was not obvious because of the power of the culture. We shake our heads, but perhaps we ought to do less of that and ought to spend our time worrying how our culture is affecting us in ways that future generations of believers are going to shake their heads at.

Well what of our culture? And what of its influence upon the way we read the Bible and understand its teaching? We have before us this evening a perfect example of how our modern western culture makes very difficult our understanding and appreciation of a biblical teaching. I'm thinking particularly of Peter's teaching here regarding the priesthood of all believers.

But before I explain our problem with this doctrine, let me clear away one typical misunderstanding that may result largely from the fact that what Peter actually means is an idea so alien to our intellectual and spiritual milieu that we leap to embrace interpretations of Peter's words that fit neatly with our preconceived notions, however unlikely they are or even contrary to the biblical evidence itself.

Christians today hear the phrase "priesthood of all believers" from time to time and, very often, it is used with the understanding that this "priesthood" is a new development, a change in the situation that prevailed in the ancient epoch. I don't know how many times I have heard ordinary Christians, Christian ministers, and Christian scholars speak as if the "priesthood of all believers" were a radical innovation. Whereas before, in the religion of Moses and the prophets, God's people had priests through whose work the relationship of God with his people was mediated, whereas before only a few were priests, now every believer is a priest and every believer has his or her own relationship with God. How many times have I heard the idea of the priesthood of all believers described as one of the principle differences between the Old Testament and the New!

This is why so many Protestants refuse to employ the term "priest" for the Christian minister. To them a priest is a very different thing than a minister, pastor, or preacher. But, of course, it is not so and the Bible makes it very clear that it is not so. American Protestants forget that the English word "priest" is a transliteration of the Greek word *presbyter*, the word ordinarily translated "elder."

I hope it is obvious to you that the idea that the priesthood of all believers is a radical innovation in the New Testament could not possibly be the teaching of the Bible; that it was not Peter's understanding nor that of any other biblical writer, Old Testament or New Testament! One would have thought this perfectly obvious, so obvious as to prevent anyone from drawing that conclusion. After all, Peter here cites the OT, Exodus 19 in particular, as the basis for the truth that God's people form a royal priesthood. In that passage, at that time, with Israel gathered at Mount Sinai, the Lord told them that *she would be for him a kingdom of priests*. By that he meant, certainly not some criticism of the Levitical priesthood, but that, provided they remained faithful to his covenant, they would have the holy God for their king and, in his kingdom, they would serve him in a priestly way – they too would offer sacrifices to him, sacrifices of praise, offerings of every

kind – would have a specially intimate relationship with Him, access to his presence, a service to offer him. In the OT, therefore, there was what theologians have long called “the general priesthood” and the “special priesthood.” Every Israelite was a priest in the general sense even as certain Israelites of the tribe of Levi were priests in the special sense.

Whatever it means to say that every Christian is a priest and that the church is a royal priesthood, it plainly is not a feature of believing life that began at Pentecost and was not a reality that in some way conflicted with or was in opposition to the ministry of the Levitical priests, who also served in obedience to God’s commandments. Israel was a kingdom of priests even when she had priests ministering in the sanctuary, the tabernacle and then the temple. *Today every Christian is a priest, but then every believer has always been a priest.* That never meant and doesn’t mean now that there is not such a thing as the Christian ministry, the ministry of word and sacrament, which was the ministry of the Levitical priests and which has been the calling of the Christian ministry ever since. Whatever the priesthood of all believers means, it does not conflict with, it is not inconsistent with the existence of an office in the church that has special and specific priestly functions. Paul wrote in Romans 15 that he was a priest because he was a preacher of the gospel. The apostles said, as we read in Acts 6, that the work of the priests – preaching the word and administering divine worship – had fallen to them in the new church. But there is also a priesthood, additionally a kind of priesthood that all believers share, always have and do today.

But if Peter were quoting the OT when he wrote of the royal priesthood to which all Christians belong, what did he mean by it? Well, what does Peter say? *First*, he relates our life to that of the Lord himself. He was a living stone and we are like living stones. In other words, our priesthood is directly related to his and draws its meaning from his. What Peter means by calling Jesus Christ a stone he explains by citing the passage from Isaiah where the Messiah is called a stone. In the context Isaiah was disabusing the princes of Israel of their confidence that Jerusalem was impregnable to conquest. “No,” he said, “the only building that will stand secure no matter the opposition is the house of God, of which the coming king is the cornerstone.” The cornerstone is the foundation of the foundation, the first stone to be laid and the stone that establishes the angle and the level of all subsequent stones. [Clowney, 83] In those days builders were able to cut, transport, and set in place immense stones as the foundation of great buildings. If you’ve ever walked along the tunnel that extends along the western wall, the only part of the Jerusalem temple that remains today, you will have seen those immense cut stones upon which the entire courtyard and edifice rested.

That metaphor of Christ as a foundation stone of the temple of God is then extended. God’s people are the house built on that foundation and each believer is a stone of that house. House, in either biblical Greek or modern English, can mean either the structure itself, the building, or it can mean the family that lives in the building. And the Bible long traded on that double meaning. For example, “temple” in the OT can refer to the literal or the figurative house of God, to the building, the sanctuary, or the people who worshipped God there. The latter is its meaning here. And what is a temple or a spiritual house for but for worship, where offerings are presented to God, where his praises are proclaimed for the salvation he has given to us. This is what Peter says again in v. 10. Peter was not, of course, talking about a physical building but a spiritual one. We are not part of the temple in the way that kings and great men and poets and writers are buried in the crypts of

great cathedrals. We are living stones in a spiritual house. The reference is, of course, to the church as a worshipping, serving community in the world, not only on Sunday when gathers for worship, but in daily life as we serve the Lord and make sacrifices for his sake. [Clowney, 88]

It is in this context that the people of God are described as a body of priests. A priest was someone who was holy because his work brought him into close proximity to God. He had an access to God that others did not. He was someone who served God and facilitated the worship of God. He was someone with whom God had a special relationship. And that can be said of every believer, whatever his particular calling in the kingdom of God. The particular holiness of the OT priest served as a picture of the general holiness of all of God's people.

All of this is clear enough to us and causes us no problems. What is more difficult for us, what seems genuinely impossible for many Christians in the west today to grasp, is that the biblical concept of the general priesthood *is a corporate concept*. Peter is describing the individual believer as a living part of an entire household. As living stones the meaning of our lives is determined by our relationship to the whole, to the entire body of believers organized into the house of God.

This is the key thing here, I think. *The Bible in general and Peter here specifically does not call us priests but a priesthood!* We are a spiritual house, a holy *priesthood* in v. 5. Again, in v. 9, we are a chosen people, a royal *priesthood*, and a holy nation. We are looked at from this vantage point, not as individual believers in our distinctness, but in our unity as a priesthood and a nation. Indeed, the individual believers are viewed here as stones, each of which takes his or her place in a house, a temple that is being built. Each stone is important, to be sure, but *the purpose of which can only be realized in its union with all the other stones*. We are significant as building blocks, out of which together, when properly arranged, a spiritual house can be built. The house is the great thing. All of us stones contribute to the formation of that house!

We, however, inhabitants of western civilization as we are, thinking as western people do, typically think of the priesthood of believers in highly individualistic terms. *It is one of the distinctive tendencies of the church in the western world*. We live in a democratic tradition that has placed all emphasis on the individual. We live in a particular period of the history of western civilization that that raised the consciousness of the individual to an extraordinary degree, really unprecedented in the history of mankind. The motto of the cultural revolution in west, the beginnings of which are often associated with the 1960s but which go back much earlier, if you remember was "do your own thing." People still speak of that movement as if it were altruistic, high-minded, and public spirited. "Do you own thing" suggests something quite different and the results of that revolution, of course, have been in a thousand ways to place the individual above the community, the nation, or the common welfare.

And as that principle came to be worked out in American public life it has served to fragment, to isolate, and to divide. Now we are first a mass of individuals, whose connection to one another is increasingly vague and weak. Our communities, such as they are, have become a welter of rival groups, each viewing the other with suspicion, sure of only one thing: that each group must look out for itself because no one else will care to do it precisely because the other groups are looking out for themselves. It is no wonder that observers now describe western culture as *hyper-*

individualistic. They mean by that that the community, the nation, the population as a whole has been reduced to a mere contrivance, an idea, not a real thing, not a living thing, and certainly not the purpose of the individual's life.

That is our culture, yours and mine. Those are the influences that bear down on you every day and every hour of every day. And who can possibly deny that this culture has exercised a profound influence on the thinking of American and western Christians? We are inclined, virtually without thought, to think of this priesthood to which we belong in terms of our own individual access to God, our own obligation to pray, to serve, our own relationship to Jesus Christ, direct, immediate, and intimate. That is the best we do! At worst, we think that the priesthood of all believers means that each of us is free to decide for himself or herself what the Bible teaches and what duties it does or does not impose upon us. In this understanding, every man becomes his own minister, every woman her own theologian; so people often think. Whether or not they would admit this is immaterial. It is very plainly how they live and how churches now live. But this understanding of the priesthood of all believers is something the Bible never teaches! Even the first idea – that of our own access to God – is not really the Bible's primary idea of the priesthood of all believers, and certainly not the emphasis that falls on this idea here in 1 Pet. 2.

Now, don't mistake me. There is great emphasis in the Bible placed upon the individual Christian's life and walk with God, upon his or her reading the Bible and evaluating its teaching for himself or herself. The psalms bear witness to the often intensely individual, even private, character of the Christian faith. Paul commends the believers in Berea for the care they took to compare Paul's teaching to what they found themselves in the Word of God. The profoundly individual nature of true faith and believing life is unquestionably a characteristic of the Christian religion. In how many ways does it remain true?

Down to Gehenna and up to the Throne
He travels the fastest who travels alone.

But that said, there is equally a profoundly corporate character to Christian life, a solidarity of the body of Christ, and a conviction that the meaning of every believer's life is found in his or her being part of a community of faith. Just as it is true that Christ "loved me and gave himself up for me," so it is true that "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." *You individually are not the bride of Christ. He is not a bigamist still less a polygamist, married to many wives.* It is the church, not the individual believer who is the bride of Christ! That is an understanding of life that we western and still more American Christians do not find as easy to assimilate into our thinking.

The modern evangelical thinks about salvation and about becoming a Christian in almost entirely individualistic terms. The convert doesn't hear about the church, about the community of faith, until after he has gone forward at an evangelistic meeting or confessed faith at a retreat or in someone's living room. He may never be told that his Christian life, to be authentic at all, must be the life of someone who lives in the most intimate and structural fellowship with a community of believers like himself and that his great calling as a Christian is to serve the Lord in and through that community. To the extent that the typical American evangelical thinks about the church, he or she is very likely to think of it as an institution that exists to help him in his own, individual walk

with God. It is actually the reverse! He is to live for the church, not vice versa. He does not see the church as his home, his mother, his people, his place of life and work, his family, his calling, his very body, which is the way the church is viewed in the Bible! He does not think of himself as a stone in the wall of a spiritual house.

We see this in so many ways. Private worship has been long emphasized over corporate worship. Corporate worship has been redefined as a means, an opportunity not for believers to serve God as one single body, but as a way of reaching individual unbelievers. The works of the Christian life are seen largely in individual terms. In Christian society greater emphasis falls on the life of the nuclear family than upon the life of the family of God. I remind people again and again that there is but one institution in this world that will exist in the next, and it is not *your* family. It is *this* family, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The role of the church as making demands upon the time, gifts, and energy of her people is now widely viewed with suspicion, as an encroachment on individual rights. And so such demands, however clearly defined in the Bible, are near to disappearing because such demands will not be tolerated and churches want to survive. They may explain this as a strategy to attract new individuals and minister to them, but the fact is churches know what their people will stand for and what they will not. Church discipline is a dead letter in almost all American Christianity, in large swaths of our own Presbyterian Church in America. Why? In very large part because for a long time now the church has existed for the individual, not the individual for the church. The church has become a retail establishment in a consumer culture and the customer is always right! She is reduced to salesmanship because Christians flit from church to church seeking what they want for themselves.

Here, for example, is Stanley Hauerwas, the United Methodist ethicist, explaining, in his words, "Why a Friendly, Caring Church is Impotent." [From *After Christendom?* (Abingdon, 1991)]

"The church seems caught in an irresolvable tension today. Insofar as we are able to maintain any presence in modern society we do so by being communities of care. Pastors become primarily people who care. Any attempt in such a context for the church to be a disciplined and disciplining community seems antithetical to being a community of care. As a result, the care the church gives, while often quite impressive and compassionate, lacks a rationale to build the church as a community capable of standing against the powers we confront. That the church has difficulty being a disciplined community, or even more, cannot conceive what it would mean to be a disciplining community is not surprising given the church's social position... The church exists in a buyer's or consumer's market, so any suggestion that in order to be a member of the church you must be transformed by opening your life to certain kinds of discipline is almost impossible to maintain. The called church has become the voluntary church, whose primary characteristic is that the congregation is friendly... As a result the church has increasingly found it difficult to maintain any kind of discipline that might make it identifiable as a distinct body of people with a mission to perform in the world."

Is he not right? Is this not the reason why hardly anybody in American society thinks of the Christian church as a genuinely distinct body, as a genuine alternative to the culture? But listen to

this. This is how one writer describes a person's coming to Christ in ancient Christianity. Notice how different this sounds, even how odd to modern ears, how unlike what happens today.

“What? You want to be a Christian? Ah. Well, now – it's an immense business, really. You'll have to turn around and head 180 degrees in the opposite direction. But if you're serious – and you can mull it over for a while if you wish – I'll take you to Polycarp, our bishop here, and he will no doubt talk to you and then turn you over to some of the elders in our Christian assembly, and they will take you in hand and instruct you and bring you to our weekly liturgy (you'll have to leave half-way through, though: they won't let you stay for the Lord's Supper); and if, over a period of months, everyone, and most especially Polycarp, is satisfied that you are whole-hearted in your desire to be a Christian, and that you understand all that it will entail, then Polycarp will baptize you at the liturgy, and you will then be a Christian.” [Howard, *On Being Catholic*, 141.]

That isn't perhaps exactly how it was always done early on, but it is certainly closer to the practice of the early church than is our practice today. The church loomed over the life of individual Christians, it shaped their life, it made demands, and it became the believer's new community. There was little church-hopping in those days. It was the church, in her individual congregations, that shaped their discipleship and formed the context of every part of their Christian lives. No Christian life could conceivably be led apart from the community of faith. There was no Christian life that was not conceived to be a part of that community and contributing to its life and work. *If you weren't in the church and living your life as part of the church, you weren't a Christian!* To be a Christian was to be a churchman or a churchwoman. It was as clear to them all that Christians were called to be the body of Christ, living stones built up into an entire building, a beautiful temple.

It was a glorious thing to Christians then, and it is in the Bible a glorious thing – this temple, this spiritual house. You know, everywhere in the world, the most beautiful buildings, the most impressive, are regularly houses of worship, whether Christian or those of some other religion. I make bold to say that among these, the most beautiful and the most impressive are the great Christian churches, the great basilicas and the great cathedrals. These are, themselves, images of what Peter is saying here about the church as a spiritual community. There is nothing like it in all the world: living stones built up into a spiritual house. It sometimes can seem like the church is very little, though even then, it is the apple of God's eye.

But, it often seems so little *precisely because* it is plainly far too little a thing to Christians themselves! They do not themselves understand their lives in terms of the church, they do not invest their lives in the church, they do not measure their lives according to the health and the prosperity and the fruitfulness and the power and the influence of the church of Jesus Christ. And that brings us to Peter's great emphasis here. *He sees this spiritual house not as a way-station for travelers, not as a place offering refreshment for pilgrims, not as a domicile where individual families may reside -- though in a sense it is all those things -- but as a temple, where the praises of God are proclaimed, where God is served, from which his name is proclaimed to the world.*

That is what he emphasizes here, whether in v. 5, where he speaks of the spiritual house in which a holy priesthood offers spiritual sacrifices to God – a beautiful picture of worship and service of all kinds being offered to God – or in v. 9, where he speaks of this priesthood declaring the praises of God. We do not as naturally as Christians once did think of the church as the center of God’s work and service. We tend, in our spiritual culture, to think that God’s interest terminates on individuals or perhaps on families. But the Bible’s primary emphasis is otherwise. As we read in Psalm 87:2: “The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.” *The Lord loves Christ’s church more than he loves your family, much as he loves your family.*

This is the importance of the term “priesthood” as opposed to an emphasis instead on many individual priests. It is not a denial of our individual roles as Christians, but it very definitely lays stress on is an interest in the work we perform, we accomplish together. The Lord is not as interested in you *as a priest* as he is in you being *part of a priesthood*. And, as a priesthood, he looks upon the church as the great agent of his work, his cause, his kingdom in the world. He sees what the church may do together, how in her unity, how in her common effort, she may do so much that Christians could never do in and of themselves. We must recapture that vision, that commitment, that sense of our place and purpose in the world – the union of believers into a single spiritual house, forming a priesthood in that house for the service of God. It is not easy to recapture it because it is so alien to our culture, to the air we breathe as 21st century Americans.

It is not as though we will forget the course of our individual walks with God, or that we will not care about the spiritual condition of our own families at home. Of course we shall. But all of that interest will be taken up into the sense we have, the living joyful sense we have, that God’s great purpose in our lives individually and in that of our families, is the part we play, the role we fulfill in the one, great house and priesthood of God. A distinct body of people with a single mission in the world is surely what we see here. Every Christian a part of the house, contributing to its life and work and together, in concert with all other believers powerfully and beautifully proclaiming the name and the glory of the living God and Christ his Son to our benighted and dying world.

Surely it cannot be difficult for anyone to see that such a church with such a priesthood would be a force and power that the hyper-individualized Christendom, the retail church, will never and can never be. Here is the challenge for us all. When did we last think and when did we last say:

“If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.” (Ps. 137:5-6)

Christ considered his church his highest joy. We ought to think as he does. Have we not all been too willing to sing the songs of the Lord while the church mourns in exile in foreign land? This is the need of the hour as the church withers in the western world: to recover the Christian’s own commitment to his or her life as that of a living stone in the temple of God, to realize anew that all of us belong to that holy priesthood. No single stone can make a temple; only many together, each fit into its place.