

On being Baptist: the Priesthood of all believers is explained

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With the great number of Baptists and their churches in our community, I think it could be beneficial for non-Baptists and Baptists alike to consider what constitutes the Baptists' identity, to highlight those distinctives or qualities which make Baptists an unique Christian people.

For those who are Baptists, you may find this series a brief review of principles which are at the heart of your Baptist beliefs. For you who are non-Baptists, you may be curious and discover some degree of commonality or

A Pastor's Perspective



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on some points a considerable difference of understanding. At least you will be afforded an exposure to Baptist thought and an opportunity for a better understanding of the Baptists who live around you.

Can you think of a word that sounds more unbaptistic than "priest" as "priesthood"? Well, it

is with those terms that we must begin an explanation of true Baptists. Front and center in the Bible, dominant in the major discoveries of the Protestant Reformers, and paramount to the Baptist tradition is the principle of the priesthood of all believers.

The priesthood of all believers is the expression of the soul's competency, which is according to theologian E.Y. Mullins, the Baptists' unique contribution to religion. Soul competency means that the individual, because created in the image of God, is responsible for moral and religious decisions. The individual is competent under the leadership of God's Spirit to make a personal response to God's call in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to commune with God, and to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord. No human priest may claim to be mediator between the soul and God because no possible reason can be assigned on his part not common to all believers. Therefore, by the manner in which God created each of us, in His image, we are competent for fellowship with and service for our Creator. This is the essence of the priesthood of all believers.

By defining our terms, even further light is shed on the principle. A "priest" is one who relates to and acts for God. The "priesthood" consists of "priests" and their functions. "Believers" are those who have received Jesus Christ as Savior and are

following Him as Lord of life. So the priesthood of all believers means that every Christian is a priest, a person who relates directly to God without need of any human mediator and who serves God by serving others.

Baptist trace the origin of the priesthood of all believers to biblical teachings. In the Old Testament we read of the Lord God delivering the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and guiding them toward Canaan. In the Sinai wilderness, Moses met with God on the mountain who said: "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:3-6). This covenant is an invitation of God to all Israelites to be priests, for each individual to relate to and serve God.

Birthed in the Old Testament, the priesthood of all believers came to fruition in the New Testament. Biblical texts include 1 Peter 2:5,9; Revelation 1:5,6; 5:9-10; and 20:6. Peter wrote to the early church: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of Him who called

you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9) We see that Israel's vocation and calling to be a kingdom of priests has now become the vocation and calling of Christians.

But the priesthood of all believers has not fared well through church history. In fact, from the second through the sixteenth centuries, it was shoved to the margin of the church's life. The tragic results were threefold. First, the priesthood was clericalized. The church stressed the priesthood of some believers rather than all believers. This separated Christians into two distinct classes — clergy and laity. Equality among believers gave way to hierarchy and the domination of the priests over the laity.

Second, grace was sacramentalized. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, dispensed by the church through the clergy, became the accepted means of communicating grace and salvation. Sacramental faith replaced personal faith. Mediated access to God through the priests usurped direct access for the believers through Jesus Christ. And, finally, the church was institutionalized to the point that the church became a place to go rather than a people on the go. The consequences of marginalizing the priesthood of all believers proved disastrous.

Yet, the Protestant Reformation occurred in the sixteenth century. Reformers like Martin

Luther, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli rediscovered and reasserted the priesthood of all believers. In 1544 Luther emphasized that each Christian is a priest and needs no mediator save Christ, that each Christian is a minister with the duty to share the gospel with others. The priesthood of all believers became a prominent tenant of Protestantism.

As much as any other Protestant body of believers, early Baptists reclaimed the principle. John Smyth of England in 1608 and other founders sealed the priesthood of all believers in the very heart of the Baptist movement. It has remained there for true Baptists.

The priesthood of all believers is a foundational principle for Baptists. It declares that every follower of Jesus Christ is free to come to God without the mediation of a priestly class which has an exclusive control over the dispensing of God's favor. The Christian is free to read the Bible and be guided to its meaning by God's Spirit. It is not a carte blanche for believing anything one wants or claims to be a Baptist. For one's freedom in doctrinal interpretation and personal behavior is tempered by the convictions of the community of believers.

To understand true Baptists and their ways, you must begin at the priesthood of all believers.

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District meeting scheduled
The United Methodist Women of the Elizabeth City District, which includes Edenton, will hold their annual district meeting on Saturday, Oct. 21, at Plymouth United Methodist Church, Plymouth, NC, beginning at 10 a.m.
Items on the agenda include approving next year's budget, electing some new district officers and presenting certificates.
Lunch will be served by the ladies of the church for \$3.50 each.

Hearts Desire will perform at Bandon
Hearts Desire will be performing at Bandon Chapel in Arrowhead Beach, Edenton, on Sunday, Oct. 15, at 7 p.m.
For more information, call 221-4282.
Methodists plan praise service here
On Saturday, Oct. 21, at 5:30 p.m., Edenton United Methodist Church again offers an informal service of praise.
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