

# Priesthood of all believers

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Littlebourne - 28th September 2025 - 1 Peter 2:1-10, Hebrews 7:23-28

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1 Peter 2:1-10:

*1 So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.*

*4 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For it stands in Scripture:*

*“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious,  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”*

*7 So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,*

*“The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,”*

*8 and*

*“A stone of stumbling,  
and a rock of offense.”*

*They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.*

*9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

#### Hebrews 7:23-28:

*23 The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, 24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*

*26 For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27 He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. 28 For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.*

*Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, 2 a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. 3 For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. 4 Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. 5 They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain." 6 But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. 7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.*

The topic today is "the priesthood of all believers". Simply put, this is the doctrine that all believers in Christ share in His priestly status. He is the great high priest, but in our union with Him, we all also are priests.

## History

The first use of the exact term is hard to date. The first usage might be by John Owen in 1650, but it gained widespread usage throughout the 19th Century amongst Protestant writers. However, despite such a late date for this phrase, the concept dates back to the early church and appears very early in Christian writings. The Odes of Solomon (likely written between AD 70 and 120 by a Jewish Christian), talks about ordinary believers as priests offering sacrifices. Irenaeus (circa AD 180) writes that "all the righteous possess the sacerdotal rank". For Augustine (late 4th, early 5th Century), part of baptism was ordination into Christ's royal priesthood.

Later though, the idea of all believers being priests was overshadowed. The professional priesthood had arisen, the practices of going to God via intermediaries became more and more common - praying to saints, and asking them to pray for you, grace mediated by clergy, no salvation outside the sacraments of the institutional church and its priesthood, these sorts of ideas.

Martin Luther though, along with his fellow reformers, brings back the idea of the priesthood of all believers, and firmly. In 1520, he writes 'To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation' and part of what he writes is his dismissal of the division of people into a 'spiritual' professional priesthood, and a secular laity. He says instead that all believers are priests in the sight of God. He writes:

*That the pope or bishop anoints, makes tonsures, ordains, consecrates, or dresses differently from the laity, may make a hypocrite or an idolatrous oil-painted icon, but it in no way makes a Christian or spiritual human being. In fact, we are all consecrated priests through Baptism, as St. Peter in 1 Peter 2[:9] says, "You are a royal priesthood and a priestly kingdom," and Revelation [5:10], "Through your blood you have made us into priests and kings."*

From there, this has been a classic touchstone of Protestant thought, and one way in which sometimes we've distinguished ourselves from the Roman, or Eastern churches, although that might be unfair to them.

## Church leadership

But protestant thought has always had a place for hierarchy in the body of Christ - we have leaders in the church, elders, ministers, and often quite strict rules about who can and cannot do things like baptise people or administer communion. The concept of all being priests does not mean that church should be a free for all.

What the concept does mean, is that when we stand here at the front, leading, it's not that we stand between you and God. We should be facilitating the worship of God, not being the medium along which it passes. We don't channel the praise up, nor the blessings down. In our worship, we *all* ascend to God. God calls all His people to worship Him, not just a select few, and pours His blessings on all believers. In that sense we are all priests.

## Priests

What is a priest? A priest is someone that mediates between humanity and the divine. Most religions have them in some form - persons who are set apart, or ordained, to conduct certain rituals, make offerings, mediate between the higher and those lower in their religious system. A priest is someone who can approach the divine in some way.

In the Old Testament, we see the priesthood established following the exodus from Egypt. God instructed Moses to set apart the tribe of Levi for special service to God, with Aaron and his descendants specifically appointed as priests.

Anyone who was not a priest could not approach the altar, or offer sacrifices directly. Much of the worship therefore was constricted to the priesthood alone. Ordinary Israelites could not fully worship without them, and could not receive atonement or make offerings without their mediation. If you weren't a priest, you'd need a priest to act on your behalf.

Whilst ordinary people could not approach God easily if at all, even the priests could not approach at will. Leviticus 16:2:

*2 and the Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.*

Not even the high priest could just approach God when he liked. To enter the Holy of Holies, there were sacrifices for his own sin required, and then a limitation that he could only enter for a special purpose once a year. Sin presented a massive barrier between God and man.

## New priesthood

Hebrews 7 tells us about the old priests and our new High Priest, Christ. The Old priesthood did not have the power to save permanently. They offered sacrifices that covered sin temporarily, He offered a sacrifice once for all. They needed constant replacement, He holds His priesthood permanently.

The old priesthood has rightly passed away - we do not need earthly priests to mediate between us and God, for Christ mediates between us and God. He ever lives to intercede for us. The old priesthood is no longer required.

The writer of Hebrews makes the point that we now have such a High Priest, who has entered the Holy of Holies, and not on earth, but even closer to God. When the old high priests entered, they would tie a rope around their waists, in case they didn't make it out alive and the other priests had to drag out a dead body. Christ enters in boldly, confidently. He sits at the right hand of the Father, He makes Himself at home. The old priesthood was weak - it foreshadowed the strong, perfect priesthood of Christ.

## In Christ

The key passage about the priesthood of all believers is 1 Peter 2 (particularly verses 5 and 9):

*5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

*9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

In these verses, the implication is that all who are in Christ are part of His priesthood - He is the cornerstone, and we are built up around Him, all of us. The royal priesthood here is not then a priesthood of a few select persons, but the whole nation, the whole race, all His people are identified with this priesthood. This is a priesthood of *all believers*.

One consequence therefore of this doctrine, is that it precludes us from the type of division between Christians that says some Christians are 'priests' or have the priestly function, and others are not. We are a royal priesthood, because in our union with Him, we can approach God too, all of us.

Peter tells us we are being built up into a spiritual house. Ephesians 2:18-22:

*18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

Through Christ, the Great High Priest, we are being built into a temple where we can act as priests. Peter tells us that we are being built into this 'to offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ'. We are to act like priests - to make offerings. We do so through Christ. As all the descendants of Aaron were priests through him, we being united with Christ are priests through Him.

In short, we do not need any other mediator than Christ to gain access to God. He has done all that is required and in our union with Him, we can come with confidence into the Holy Place, as Hebrews 10(:19-23) tells us:

*19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.*

The curtain is that through which the priests of old would pass to go to God and this is likened to Christ - He is our access to God.

## Duties of priests

But a priest is not just being able to approach God. Being a priest comes with duties.

The most important duties of the Old Testament priests were to make offerings and sacrifices in the temple. They conducted the sacrifices, mediated the offerings to God, ensured that worship was conducted regularly and rightly.

They were also responsible for maintaining cleanliness. They kept the inner sections of the temple clean both in the ordinary sense of dusted and swept, but also ceremonially in the sense of all being in the order that God dictated. They would decide about cases of cleanliness for matters in the general population (e.g. leprosy or mouldy houses), and had to ensure the strictest standards of cleanliness for themselves as well, in order to conduct their main task.

Priests were also responsible for instructing and interpreting God's law. They had to be experts in scripture. They had to not only conduct themselves by what scripture commanded, but they had responsibility to ensure that the rest of the nation held to the right worship of God and followed His laws too. Being a priest was a big responsibility.

## Duties today

Being a priest today - as all believers are - is something that comes with duties also.

## Sacrifice

Peter tells us that (1 Peter 2:5)

*you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

We are being built up, into a temple in which we are the priests, in order to offer *spiritual sacrifices*. The priests of old offered sacrifices, and that aspect of priesthood has not ended. But unlike the priests of old, who offered animals, or offered tithes and portions of their harvest, we are to offer more than just a portion of our possessions. We are to offer spiritual sacrifices.

Paul writes in Romans 12:1:



*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

We are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices acceptable to God. This is our worship. As the old priests offered sacrifices in worship, so do we, and as we've talked about in recent weeks, in our worship we are the sacrifice that must be offered to God. We are analogous to the animal that died, was prepared and went up to the altar to ascend to God. We too must die, and ascend to the Lord. And this death is found in Christ. In Christ we have died - and if we have died with Him we will be raised with Him. Through Christ, we are the sacrifice on the altar, dedicated to God.

Paul says to offer our bodies as the sacrifice. When we talk about 'spiritual' sacrifices, what can run through our minds are sacrifices that aren't really sacrificing anything in particular. "It's spiritual, which is to say, not really real." But Paul says to sacrifice our bodies, our selves, something real and touchable. This sort of sacrifice does not consist of mere thoughts, but consists of action.

Verse 2 of Romans 12 though does connect this to our thoughts too. We are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds - our motivations and thought life are to be sacrifices to God also, and we should discern what God really wants.

## Proclamation

Peter also tells us (1 Peter 2:9):

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, **that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.***

God has formed this priesthood, this holy nation, His people, that His excellencies may be proclaimed. The formation of this priesthood brings Him glory.



Our duty as priests is to glorify God in proclaiming His excellencies. An obvious way we do this is in our worship. We sing songs that tell of who He is and what He has done. In communion, we are told that we are in that act 'proclaiming Christ's death' and by implication, His resurrection and everything else, until He returns. When we say the creed together, we're doing the same kind of thing. A key part of our worship making proclamations.

Hebrews 13:15:

*Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.*

The Old Testament priests did this too - their worship proclaimed that God is holy. What they did and how they worshipped sent a message. But the priests also proclaimed something about God in their ordinary lives too - the holiness of God and their important work affected their lives outside the temple. They were held to higher standards of cleanliness, had to maintain purity and set themselves apart from anything that would make them unclean. They had to be dedicated to God, not just when on their shift in the temple, but as a lifestyle.

It's easy for us to proclaim the excellencies of God on a Sunday at church, when someone else has picked the words to say. But as priests, we are called to lives of proclamation. As living sacrifices, we are to die to our old unbelieving ways. Our words and actions should be those that glorify God and proclaim Him throughout the week, not just when it's easy.

The question is not whether we proclaim something in what we do, but what exactly we are proclaiming when we act. Everything we do and say says something about what we believe, and what we think really matters. So when you wake up in the morning, is what you say and do proclaiming the truth, or a lie? Is it glorifying to God, or glorifying to someone else?

For the Old Testament priesthood, part of this was knowing what the rules were - they had to be experts in scripture and God's law. They had to know what it was to be a godly priest. For us too, we can't expect to glorify God if we are ignorant of His instructions to us. We need to be transformed by His word, that we can live lives of God honouring priesthood.

## **Conclusion**

So to conclude, since all believers are priests, we should be offering ourselves to Him, and in all that we do, proclaiming Him. To be a priest is to dedicate your life to God, and that's what we should be doing. Are we acting as the priests that we're told we are?

The Old testament priests were unmistakable. They wore the outfit. Are we unmistakably priests to our God?

Finally, since the defining feature of being a priest is that allowance to approach God, is that what we are doing? Are we approaching God?

The old priests would enter the holy place with trepidation. This priesthood is not like the old - our high priest has offered the atoning sacrifice for sin, entered the holy place and made himself comfortable. He sits at the right hand of God. Through Him, we can go to God at any time, with confidence. Take advantage, follow His example.