

## **The Priesthood of All Believers**

### **Mark Kolchin**

One of the greatest privileges that every Christian possesses is access into the presence of God. Romans 5:2 reminds us that we have “*access by faith into this grace whereby we stand and rejoice in hope of the glory of God*”. We rejoice not only because we are accepted in Christ and have a perfect standing before Him, but also because this access is not dependent upon spiritual efforts of someone else. Every believer has already been “*made fit*” through the merits of Christ (Col. 1: 12), the only truly qualified Mediator (1 Tim. 2: 5). Because of His sinless life and sacrificial death at Calvary, the way has been made open for every believer in Christ to come boldly to the throne of grace to find the mercy and grace to help in time of need, (Heb. 4:16). There is no need for any person on earth to represent us before God. Our present position is that we have been raised up and made to sit together in heavenly places with Christ (Eph. 2:1-5) despite how we were before we came to faith in Him. This means we can enjoy access into God’s presence all the time through faith in Him – praise the Lord.

In the OT, God had said to His people, the nation of Israel that they were a “*special treasure*” and “*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Ex. 19:5-6). As such, they could have and should have enjoyed ongoing access into the presence of God. However, at Mt. Sinai they failed miserably in their spiritual privileges by committing idolatry and immorality, (Ex. 32). When Moses challenged the people to take a stand for the Lord, only the tribe of Levi came forward to express their allegiance to Him. Others faced severe chastisement because of their sin. As a result, the tribe of Levi was honored with the priesthood which became their exclusive privilege from that time forward.

In the OT, the role of priests in Israel in the service of the Tabernacle (and later with the Temple) was to represent the people before God. Priests had the responsibility to take the offerings that were brought to them and then bring them to God on behalf of the offeror. In effect, it was a two-class system – the people who brought their sacrifices, and the priests who offered up those sacrifices to God while other Levites served. The priest’s focus and responsibility were upward and related to worship while other Levites’ focus, and responsibility were horizontal and was related to service among the people. This is how spiritual service was accomplished. But, despite this tremendous privilege and responsibility however, there was still much failure on the part of the priesthood. The OT is replete with examples of rank irresponsibility within the priesthood. This was true throughout Israel’s history especially during the dark days of the Judges and right down to the time of Malachi. Some priests like Samuel demonstrated faithfulness to God, but others did not. Nevertheless, the priesthood was established by God and constituted the spiritual life of His people.

In the NT however, we see a completely different picture in the spiritual life of God’s people, the Church. Instead of a two-class system that existed in Israel, we see no distinction in spiritual worship and service among the people. Instead, all believers are entitled to access before the Lord in worship as well as the spiritual privilege to serve. In Matthew 27:51, we read that at the precise moment when the Lord died at Calvary, the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. That veil made of thick cloth, represented a barrier between God and man thus preventing access into His presence except for the high priest once a year. No hand of man could

have ever torn that cloth. The fact when it was torn from top to bottom indicated it came from the unseen Hand of God which made it possible for this to take place. In the words of the Fanny Crosby hymn, He was opening “the life gates that all may go in”. What it means to us today, is that there is nothing that bars anyone from coming into God’s presence when they come through faith in Christ and His finished work. What this means additionally is that a believer does not have to rely on the work of another person to represent them before God. It also means that service for the Lord is not the exclusive privilege of a separate class of people, but rather it is the privilege (and responsibility) of *every* believer in Christ. As 1 Peter 2:5 puts it we are a “*holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*”. This truth is written to *all* believers and not a separate class. The focus is upward and on worship and again does not require the services of another. Further, in v.9, the Word of God states that we are a royal priesthood to “*proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into God’s marvelous light*”. The emphasis here is on our witness and service for the Lord – a horizontal emphasis compared to a vertical emphasis on worship to offer up spiritual (not physical) sacrifices.

The NT truth of the priesthood of all believers stands in direct contrast to present-day Christendom which reverts to an OT model of clergy-laity distinction and disregards this truth of access and service by all believers. It relegates these privileges to a certain class of people. What was true in Israel before the events at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:5-6) has been gained back because of the Lord’s finished work of redemption. While one part of Christendom emphasizes the need for a priest to represent the people, another part of it emphasizes the need for education and theological training to qualify an individual for spiritual service. Not so! These distinctions have been put away in Christ. There is no “clergy-laity” distinction. If anything, it is not the “clergy” concept that is the problem – it is the “laity” concept that is the problem! In a sense, everyone in Christ is “clergy”, so to speak. Access is available into the presence of God and service for the Lord also is the privilege of every Christ through the spiritual gifts given to each one and is not just the domain of a certain group of people (see Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:27).

The priesthood of all believers is a treasured truth of NT teaching. May each Christian fully understand their blessings and privileges in Christ and act on them in their daily walk with Him.

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