

THE ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

"Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." I Peter 2:5.

"But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." I Peter 2:9.

"And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first-begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen." Revelation 1:5-6.

One of the great doctrines of the Christian faith is the priesthood of believers in Christ. Even though we, as Baptists, have claimed this as one of our distinctive principles, it is scarcely ever mentioned in many of our pulpits. Because we have neglected to expound its meaning frequently and clearly enough for the masses of our people to understand it thoroughly, many of them would have great difficulty in explaining the meaning of this cherished doctrine.

There are those who interpret the priesthood of believers as meaning that every child of God has the right to read and interpret the Bible for himself. Others hold that the priesthood of believers means that every Christian has the inalienable right and is competent to approach God directly and to have personal dealings with Him without the assistance of another human being as priest or mediator. While these interpretations are certainly true, they constitute only a partial meaning of the priesthood of believers.

To some of our people the title of "priest" carries with it the taint of sacerdotalism and superstition. However, this conception arises from a gross perversion of the meaning of the word, and from the arrogation to themselves, by a certain class of men, of privileges to which they are not entitled, and of powers which they do not actually possess.

I. The Fact Of The Royal Priesthood.

The New Testament sets forth two types of priesthood — the priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of all believers. The priesthood of all believers is founded on and is inseparable from the eternal priesthood of Christ. Without right thoughts about the priesthood of our Lord, we cannot understand and appreciate the equally glorious truth of the priesthood of believers.

Peter was commissioned by the Holy Spirit to write the fact that all Christians constitute one great priesthood. I would remind you that Peter did not write, "Ye ought to be priests," or "Ye should be an holy priesthood," but he did write, "Ye are an holy priesthood," and "Ye are a royal priesthood." It is both obvious and noteworthy that Peter did not arrogate this dignity and office to himself and his fellow-apostles, but that he did extend it to all of the saved. The title of "priest" is not limited to a certain number of the saved, but it is conferred upon every believer in Christ. If you are a Christian, then you are a priest of God, whether you like it or not.

Under the New Testament economy the Christian is a priest by virtue of his having been born from above, or his having been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ. Sonship and priesthood are inseparable. The spiritual priesthood, like all other honors and privileges which the children of God possess, is ours by virtue of our union with Christ. Christian priesthood is not something which is attained, but it is something which is conferred as a gift. This honor and office are never of man's earning or deserving, but always of God's grace. The priesthood is bestowed upon all true believers by the grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

What qualifies us for the royal priesthood, with a perfect right of direct access into the presence of God, is the birth from above. One becomes a priest the instant he believes on Christ as his Saviour, and is washed from his sins in the blood of redemption. Every true Christian is a priest and can approach God through the mediation of Christ without the help of any man. "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (I Timothy 2:5).

Whatever of dignity, privilege, power, and responsibility there may be in the royal priesthood, we must remember that it belongs to all believers and not merely some of them. This does not mean that all are aware of the dignity and appreciative of the honor which have been conferred upon them, or that they are striving diligently to discharge all of their responsibilities as priests, but it is a fact, nevertheless, that all who are in Christ Jesus are, by virtue of this position, included in the royal priesthood.

The priesthood of believers means that all of us, whom Christ has bought with His own blood on Calvary's cross, are permitted and enabled to share in the continuing work of the Lord by offering themselves in loving obedience to Him and in loving service to their fellowmen.

II. The Functions Of The Royal Priesthood.

Peter wrote first of our holy priesthood and then of our royal priesthood. These are two different phases of our God-given privilege. Dedicated Christians, who are set apart for the service of God, compose the holy priesthood. Their function is to come into the presence of God, bringing with them spiritual sacrifices. What are these spiritual sacrifices? Hebrews 13:15 tells us: "By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name." So, it is our privilege and responsibility to adore, worship, and praise Him. John encouraged us to do this in Revelation 1:5-6: "Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever." Christ loveth us. Christ liberates us from the penalty of sin, the power of sin, and eventually the presence of Sin. Christ lifted us into salvation, satisfaction, and service.

Perhaps we should summarize the functions of the royal priesthood in three words.

1. Sacrifice.

The first function of the Jewish priests was the offering of sacrifices to God in behalf of men. Their sacrifices involved the infliction of death upon living creatures, such as oxen, sheep, goats, and doves, and their use in religious worship. This whole system of animal sacrifices was abrogated when Christ made His effectual, expiatory sacrifice on Calvary's cross. His never-to-be-repeated sacrifice so completely answered its purpose that it put an end to all such oblations. His sacrifice is unexhausted in its virtue, and unfailing in the blessings it confers. Christians cannot offer any sacrifices which can expiate, propitiate, or atone for their sins, for this has already been done for them once-for-all by Christ when He died for them.

Whereas Judaism required the offering of animal sacrifices, Christianity calls for the offering of spiritual sacrifices. Under the law material sacrifices were required, but under the gospel the only sacrifices which are required are those which proceed from a regenerate heart, and which testify to the gratitude and the devotion of an emancipated spirit.

We are called upon to offer spiritual sacrifices, and we are given the assurance that they will be acceptable to God. We are challenged to present ourselves -- body, soul, and spirit -- as a sacrifice unto God. Paul said: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1). You are not to present the dead body of a slain beast, but you are to present your own living body. The value of a material sacrifice lies in the thing given, but the chief value of the spiritual sacrifice consists in the will to give it. A material sacrifice is one which, by its very nature, demands repetition; a spiritual sacrifice, if it be a full expression of the heart, is offered in Paul's statement: "I beseech you...that ye present your bodies." First, it is to be an act. The verb "present" is in the aorist tense, which signifies that it is an instantaneous act, done now, once and for all, never to be repeated. Secondly, it is a dedicatory act. The presentation of yourself to God is a definite, intelligent, and loving act. It is something that you do of your own free will.

Before one can experience the highest and best in life, a complete dedication of all to God is necessary. It is my firm conviction that I owe to Him my personality, or all that I am -- my body, the physical; my mind, the intellectual; my heart, the emotional; and my will, the volitional; -- my possessions, or all that I have -- self, talents, time, money, and influence; -- and my plans, or all that I hope to be.

Present your body to the Lord as a living sacrifice. He made it, and He has loaned it to you for your lifetime, but it is His. He gives you every beat of your heart and every breath of your lungs. You should present your body to God because of what He has done for you, of what He desires to do in you, and of what He wants to do through you. He wants to see with your eyes, to hear with your ears, to think with your mind, to love with your heart, to walk with your feet, to work with your hands, and to speak with your tongue. If you will yield yourself to Him, He will have an instrument through which to work. Lay yourself on the altar before Him and say:

"Naught that I have my own I call,
I hold it for the Giver;
My heart, my life, my hope, my all,
Are His, and His forever."

2. Intercession.

One of the obvious privileges of the priestly calling is the right of access to God. It is the happy privilege of every Christian to approach God directly and without any human intermediary. Every child of God is commanded to pray, and he is rightfully expected to do so. He should pray for himself, that he may be kept unspotted from the world, and that he may be guided correctly in all his decisions and actions. He should pray for others also. Christ intercedes for all of His followers. Consequently, each of them should share in the ministry of intercession for others. Many have been deprived of numerous blessings because we have failed to lift up their needs to the throne of God's compassionate grace. For this reason, each of us would do well to pray, "Lord, forgive me for neglecting the great privilege of intercession." Intercession with God for others is one of the greatest privileges and responsibilities that a Christian has. Do you practice intercession, as you should? Have you observed its power? God's Word says: "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16). Others are blessed tremendously when God's children are faithful in the ministry of earnest intercession.

3. Benediction.

If you will examine the idea of royalty in the Old Testament, you will find that benediction is the great underlying thought of it. To Abraham the promise was given, "I will bless thee....and thou shalt be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2). "I will bless thee" is the one side. "Thou shalt be a blessing" is the other side. There is no privilege without a corresponding responsibility. Christians, too, have the privilege of receiving from God in order that they may bestow upon others. This is the idea of the royal priesthood; priestly privilege on the one hand, and royal bounty on the other. All that one receives from God is a sacred trust to be used for the glory of God and for the good of others.

As members of the holy priesthood, we come into God's presence, bringing our gratitude, praises, and worship; also interceding with Him for others. Then, as royal priests, we go forth to represent the Lord before men and to convey His mind to them. We have the wonderful opportunity of being interpreters of God's will to men. The Lord created us, preserved us, sustained us, redeemed us, and saved us in order that "ye may show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." The word which is here translated "praises" means that which makes character noble and glorious. When applied to God it means the excellencies, glories, majesties, and wonders which are the expression and revelation of His nature. Therefore, we live to proclaim in character, word, and deed the excellencies and grandeurs of God. "Show forth" means to display, to exhibit, or to tell on the outside what takes place on the inside.

He who would live the priestly life must see to it that, everywhere and always by the grace of God, he so lives, and speaks, and acts that he will prove to be a blessing to others. The aim of the true Christian must be to reflect Christ. In this connection Paul wrote to the Corinthians saying: "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (II Corinthians 4:6). When God shines in our hearts, this light enters into every thought, attitude, motive, and deed of the life. God's grace and glory are revealed to us in order that we may reflect them for the illumination of others. Those of us who have received the light of God's glory are responsible for transmitting it to others. To reflect properly and effectively "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," we must be like Him in thought, feeling, and action. When Christ's light burns within His followers, it will shine forth in their looks, their words, and their deeds.

More than nineteen centuries ago the great King-Priest said: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" -- power in heaven, the priestly power, to obtain blessing; power on earth, the kingly power, to dispense it. That power is waiting for channels to convey it. The treasury of grace and truth and love is awaiting appropriation and distribution, calling for royal priests to come and receive, and then to go and communicate and share it with others. We have been forgiven in order that we might proclaim forgiveness. We have been saved in order that we might serve. We have been loved in order that we might look out upon the world with something of the compassion of Christ. Let us not merely claim the priestly privilege, but let us exercise it. Propagating the gospel of Christ is the chief business of every Christian. Every Christian is under obligation to publish the good news of Him Who has called him out of darkness into His marvelous light. "To do good and to communicate forget not, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Hebrews 13:16). God is seeking worshipers, workers, and witnesses. It is the duty of every believer to witness for Christ to others with his lips and

his life. God never meant for any Christian just to be a spectator of an auditor, but He expects him to be a performer. He is going to hold every priest or believer responsible for proclaiming by word, character, and life the wonders of redeeming love to those who have never heard this glorious message and received the wonderful Saviour. Our possession of the gospel and the positive command of the Master in the Great Commission place us under this obligation, from which there is no evasion or exemption. The open doors and broad highways of opportunity call for our very best efforts to proclaim the gospel to all men. As Frederick George Scott said:

THE CALL

The great world's heart is aching,
 aching fiercely in the night,
And God alone can heal it,
 and God alone gives light;
And the men to bear that message,
 and to speak the living Word,
Are you and I, my brothers,
 and the millions that have heard.
Can we close our eyes to duty?
 Can we fold our hands at ease,
While the gates of night stand open to the
 pathway of the seas?
Till the lands which sin has blasted
 have been quickened from the dead?
Can we shut up our compassions?
 Can we leave our prayer unsaid?

We grovel among trifles,
 and our spirits fret and toss,
While above us burns the vision of the
 Christ upon the cross;
And the blood of God is streaming from
 His broken hands and side,
And the lips of God are saying,
 "Tell my brothers I have died."
O voice of God, we hear thee
 above the shocks of time,
Thine echoes roll around us,
 and the message is sublime;
No power of man shall thwart us,
 no stronghold shall dismay,
When God commands obedience,
 and love has led the way.