



WHEN THE PEOPLE GATHER

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World Communion Sunday

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Today, we continue the sermon series on the beliefs of those in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We lift up what it means to belong to the Priesthood of all Believers in the Christian endeavor. The Christian finds a place at the table and a loving source on which to build one's faith.

The doctrine of the Priesthood of all believers originates in scripture and championed by Martin Luther and John Calvin during the Reformation in the 15th century. This doctrine was a direct challenge to the Roman Catholic Pope and the entire role of the priest as the intermediary between God, Christ and the people.

The concept of Intermediary is not new. The role of the religious orders in the Old Testament controlled access to God through the high priests whenever sacrifices and high holy days were celebrated. Only the religious order could take the matters into the presence of God in the Temple while the ordinary folks were left outside.

As Presbyterian Christians, we understand the Priesthood of all believers in a much different way. Our church stands on the recognition that all faithful Christians are priests. Yes, there are ministers, pastors, or teaching elders who are seen as priests. I have even experienced those ministers who think they are the Pope or some Bishop. For myself, I'm called out of a congregation for a special role in the Body of Christ as pastor to lead and to minister to the people. This doctrine is pretty well embedded within the theology and biblical understanding of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The writer John D. Witvliet wrote a response to a question in the *Reformed Worship* magazine (#85) about the Priesthood of all believers. He writes, **"This doctrine takes us into beautiful and mysterious territory. First Peter 2:4-8 and Revelation 1:4-6; 5:6-10 refer to believers as priests— a remarkable claim indeed in light of the nature of priesthood in the Old Testament. The point is that the church's professional clergy are not the only "access**

points” to the priesthood of Jesus Christ. All believers can pray in Jesus’ name—anywhere and anytime.”

I want to share a couple of examples from my 33 years of ministry. You might also have examples from your own journey of faith.

After I was an ordained Presbyterian pastor, I was denied participation in communion in another faith community. The priest publicly said that only those of the Catholic faith were allowed to the table. So all the Presbyterian folks in the pew we were sitting remained seated while others received communion.

I have always questioned, if Christ is the center of our faith, why then are some people left out of coming to the table? Christ offered his table and his meal to all who believe in him and accept him as Lord and Savior. There are some faith communities that give the authority to the priest or pastor to make decisions for the people on who can participate in the Lord’s Supper.

Another example is when I visited with a woman in a congregation where I was the installed pastor. She came to my study at the church to talk with me about some concerns. As we visited, I began to suspect that she wanted me to hear her confession and absolve her of her sins. She explained that she married outsider her faith community and entered the Presbyterian Church. She was used to going to the priest and seeking absolution for her sins as well as giving penance. I shared with her that as Reformed Christians we can go right to god without going through me.

We then had a conversation on what it meant to be the Priesthood of all believers. This was quite foreign to her at first and then she could see that God and Christ are accessible to her anytime and anyplace. Near the end of our time together, she still wanted me to give her absolution. So I said the words that gave her cure and then we prayed together.

Friends, each one us has access to God through Christ at all times and all places. We affirm a great understanding of who Christ is as the great High Priest. In the Book of Hebrews chapter 4 verses 14 thru 16, we hear and see a clear relational pattern with the Lord. **¹⁴ Since, then, we have a great High priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

The prophet Isaiah is calling out to the people to renew the main foundation of their faith in God. The rulers of the day are scoffing at the belief of an Almighty God and those who believe in God while they themselves are living ungodly lives. So Isaiah says to the faithful¹⁶ **...the Sovereign LORD says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic.** This future stone is Christ and how he is the cornerstone of a faith community and the Christian follower.

Like Isaiah, First Peter conveys to the followers of Christ the foundational nature of the Lord. Peter says **⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and ⁵like living stones,**

let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. So Jesus becomes more than just a touchstone, he becomes the cornerstone of our faith and of the Christian church. Truly, Jesus gives us the building blocks on which to build as he is the foundation of our faith.

Peter also writes, **“...whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”** ⁷**to you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,”** ⁸**and “A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.”**

My dear sisters and brothers, Peter guides us to adhere to the doctrine and practice on what it means to be the Priesthood of all Believers. Like the Christians then and to us today, Peter affirms us by saying, ⁹**“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people..”** For Christian people, we are God’s own. Peter says to us, **“in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts 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.** Only God through Christ strengthens us in our faith through grace.

One of the great reformers, Martin Luther wrote this about the “Priesthood of all believers,” “All Christians are priests, and all priests are Christians.” That’s a different dynamic as all Christians are priest.

Friends, let us be mindful that each of us is a member of the Priesthood of all believers. As we gather today on this World Communion Sunday, let us serve Christ with pure hearts and loving actions as we continually build our faith in Jesus Christ.

This morning, I conclude with a prayer based on a familiar hymn. Let us pray.

O God, your Son and our Savior,

1. Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the head and cornerstone;
chosen of the Lord and precious,
binding all the church in one;
holy Zion’s help forever,
and her confidence alone.

2. To this temple, where we call thee,
come, O Lord of Hosts, today!
With thy faithful loving-kindness
hear thy people as they/we pray,
and thy fullest benediction
shed within its walls always.

Text: 7th cent. Latin; trans. By John Mason Neale, 1818-1866
music: Henry Purcell; adapt. By Ernest Hawkins

We are, O God, your children growing in our faith so we can build on Jesus Christ and make him know throughout the world. Amen.

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Scriptural Support

Isaiah 28:14-16 (NIV)

¹⁴ Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers who rule this people in Jerusalem.

¹⁵ You boast, “We have entered into a covenant with death, with the realm of the dead we have made an agreement.

When an overwhelming scourge sweeps by, it cannot touch us, for we have made a lie our refuge and falsehood our hiding place.”

¹⁶ So this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic.

1 Peter 2:1-12 (NIV) The Living Stone and a Chosen People

¹ Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house^[a] to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”

⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

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

⁸ and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Living Godly Lives in a Pagan Society

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.