

Priesthood of believers

The Scripture:

Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them (Hebrews 7:25).

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9).

The thought:

Any time there is structure in an organization such as a church hierarchy develops. Some people end up being seen as more important than others. Some people make decisions and others seem content to follow them. Hierarchy is not necessarily inappropriate. The problem arises when the hierarchy is so controlling that people are unable to experience God's truth for themselves.

The Old Testament is very clear about such a structure in the kingdom of God. Exodus and Leviticus outline the responsibilities of the priests. They serve in the line of Moses and Aaron as mediators between God and his people. In the New Testament, however, we see a shift in this pattern. Jesus enters the scene as the Great Priest. He is the "much more than" sacrifice. His action on the cross does away with the need for the elaborate system of sacrifices and the mediation of the priests. Jesus is the sacrifice and the priest. Because of Jesus we can all know God's grace equally and approach him accordingly. Paul affirms this in Ephesians 4:7: "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it."

Jesus is the great intercessor. He is the one through whom we can come to God. We are not dependent upon some structure or system to come into the presence of God. While there may be special people with special tasks within the structure of the church, they are not the final arbiters of who comes to salvation and who can be a part of the kingdom.

Our relationship with Jesus does not require an intermediary.

This truth has significant implications for teaching and learning within the church. It means that the goal is to develop independent learners who find their own truth in the Word of God and who are personally guided by the Holy Spirit. Each learner can access the Word of God and come to the Truth of God without the assistance of another person. While there is still great need for helpful teachers, they are not there to limit or screen the understanding and content of Truth. They are there to help believers to come to Truth under the authority of God's word. Jesus is the Truth. Truth is found personally and individually as we enter into relationship with him.

This "coming to truth" is in itself a "dangerous" process in that new learners and believers may reach Biblically-based conclusions that differ from their teachers. There is much precedence for this (e.g., Saint Paul, Martin Luther, John Wesley, John Wycliffe, William Tyndale). Truth is not easily controllable. As students learn from Scripture or even eventually translate Scripture, they may challenge the thought of their teachers. Student learning is not totally dependent upon that of teachers. Because God speaks to people directly and through his Word, students may learn theologically and Biblically in ways that may break the structures of their teachers. This can be a trying process for both teachers and students.

Jesus is the great teacher who seeks to be the Truth for all. We know God through Jesus. When Jesus had completed his priestly task he sat down (Hebrews 10:12) thereby signifying that his job was done. The "much more than" priest made a final and complete way through to God. All learning and study needs to be considered in this context of Jesus—the personification of Truth.

The song:

*Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;
Wean it from earth; through all its pulses move;
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art;
And make me love Thee as I ought to love.*

*Teach me to love Thee as Thine angels love,
One holy passion filling all my frame;
The kindling of the heaven descended Dove,
My heart an altar, and Thy love the flame.*

--George Croly (1854)

The question:

In what sense am I a priest? How do I help others move toward direct spiritual access to God's Truth?

The experience:

The task of the church as expressed in Scripture is specifically related to teaching. Scripture is replete with instructions to teach the faith. Some years ago, in a seminary class, I was given the assignment of reading the entire New Testament within the first two weeks of the semester—preferably in a new translation. We were to assume that we had not read it before and we were to attempt to understand its message as a whole. I remember that the impression that struck me so clearly was the continued emphasis upon teaching. Whether reading the words of Jesus or the writings of Paul, there are continual reminders to teach the faith to and through God's people.

Recognizing this observation, let me propose that leadership within the church be changed to function "educationally" rather than "hierarchically" or "administratively" or even "ecclesiastically." Suppose church leaders came to see education as the primary function? What difference would this realization make within the church? How could educational principles best be implemented within the church and what would be the result of that implementation?

I believe one major result would be that church leaders would be intentionally concerned with teaching believers in order that believers could assume responsibility for their own faith and ethical life style. The goal would be to make believers dependent upon God and Scripture rather than upon the church leadership for guidance. This stance is essentially a reaffirmation of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

The rise of a professional, paid clergy class within the church is sometimes counter-productive to this ministering mandate of the church. Part of the solution to the problem of clergy overwork and possible lay "underwork," can be found in a proper recognition of the educational implications of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.