

BAPTISTS:

The Priesthood of the *Believer* or of *Believers*?

To say that a Baptist is a priest sounds strange to some persons. But we are. Every one of us. In fact, **Baptists insist that all who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior are priests, believer priests.** The concept of the priesthood of believers is basic for Baptists. As with some other beliefs important to Baptists, we have varying interpretations of what the concept means, but we all treasure the biblical truth of the priesthood of believers.

What Does It Mean to Be a Priest?

Being a priest involves both *opportunity* and *responsibility*. In the Old Testament, a priest held a special place in the worship of God. Priests were responsible for certain aspects of worship, such as the sacrifice of animals. They served as mediators between the people and God.

The High Priest, the head priest, was the only one, however, allowed to enter the Holy of Holies in the Jewish temple. This especially sacred place was separated from the rest of the temple and from the other priests and worshippers by a great curtain or veil.

With the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, all of this changed. No longer was the sacrifice of animals appropriate, because Christ, the Lamb of God, had given himself as a sacrifice for sin. This was a once-and-for-all act.

“Each believer is a priest,
both before God for oneself and by caring for
fellow believers and for persons in the world for
whom Christ died.”

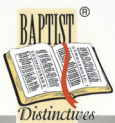
We Baptists

Study and Research Division - Baptist World Alliance

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At the crucifixion of Jesus, the great veil in the temple “was torn in two from top to bottom” (Matthew 27:51 NIV), indicating that Jesus, the great High Priest, now mediated between God and humankind. No longer were priests of the Old Testament variety needed. Indeed, ***all who believe in Jesus become priests with direct access to God. Human mediators are no longer needed. We can go directly to God in prayer, confession, praise, and worship. What an opportunity!***



But being a priest also carries responsibility. In the Old Testament, a priest in a sense represented God to the people. Today, the believer priest has responsibility to share his or her knowledge of God with other persons, both in word and in deed.

The believer priest has responsibility to bear witness to God's love as shown in Jesus Christ and to demonstrate God's love by ministering to persons in his name. This responsibility is carried out in various ways by Baptists, such as in evangelism, missions, ministry, and social action to benefit others.

Where Did the Concept of the Priesthood of Believers Come From?

Martin Luther, a leader in the Protestant Reformation, is often linked with the concept of the priesthood of believers. Luther challenged the Roman Catholic Church's emphasis on the special role played by the Roman Catholic priests.

Luther insisted that every believer was a priest, with direct access to God. He did not call for the elimination of the role of pastors but indicated that all persons, not just pastors, had a priestly function. Even before Luther burst on the European church scene, various Christian groups had stressed the priesthood of believers.

However, the concept of the priesthood of believers for Baptists does not come from the teachings of Luther or any Christian group but from the New Testament. On the basis of various New Testament passages, Baptists have insisted that every person who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ has access directly to God. Each is directly responsible to God. Each is to share the love of God.

The Priesthood of The Believer

The priesthood of each believer in Baptist thought is tied closely to another concept, that of soul competency. Each person has a God-given competence to know and follow God's will. A decision to follow Christ as Lord and Savior is an individual decision; no one can make that decision for another. Being a believer priest is a gift from God, not a human achievement; it comes with salvation.

Each believer priest is responsible for his or her own actions. Individual believers can go directly to God without the aid of any intermediary. Individuals can and should read and interpret the Bible for themselves, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, without religious officials dictating to them what to believe.

Believer priests are all equal to one another in Christ (Galatians 3:26-28). There is only one High Priest, that is Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7:23-8:13).

Each believer priest has a responsibility to be committed to Christ and to share Christ through word and deed. As Peter stated it: "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9 NIV).



"Ye are a chosen generation, a peculiar people; that ye should hath called you out of darkn

Therefore, a church does not have only one priest. It has many believer priests as members who are to communicate the love and forgiveness of God and to demonstrate concern and compassion of one believer for another.

The Priesthood of Believers

The New Testament speaks of the priesthood of believers. Believer priests are part of the body of Christ. They form a community of believers. Although each believer priest is individually responsible to God, all believer priests are related to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ (Revelation 1:5-6; 5:9-10).

This communal aspect of believer priesthood highlights the fact that being a Christian involves fellowship with other believers. This fellowship functions to encourage and assist the believer in Christian growth and ministry. How sad and difficult it would be to live the Christian life in isolation from other believers.

The fellowship of believer priests also aids in interpreting the Bible and understanding God's will. Although each believer priest can and ought to read and interpret the Bible for herself or himself, the competent and wise believer will seek insight and understanding from other believer priests. By searching the teachings of believer priests in the past and by seeking out the wisdom of those in the present, persons are aided in their understanding of the Bible and of God's will.

The Baptist model of a church rests on the concept of the priesthood of believers. A church is made up of persons who have exercised their God-given competency by believing in Jesus as Savior and Lord and by voluntarily associating with a particular fellowship of believers.

Each believer priest in the fellowship is equal to all of the others. Therefore, no one is in authority over all. Thus decisions are made by the community of priests seeking to know the will of the head of the church, the great High Priest, Jesus Christ. They do this by prayer, Bible study, meditation, and discussion.

Challenges to the Priesthood of All Believers

Many factors tend to undermine the priesthood of all believers.

Some persons, for example, prefer for a person or group to tell them what to believe and what the Bible teaches; they consider the responsibility of being a believer priest a burden, not a blessing. Historically, Baptists have not been among these. Others neglect to exercise their priesthood as believers and thus they miss the blessing of what it means to be a believer priest. Unfortunately, some Baptists have been among these.

In addition to apathy and neglect the priesthood of believers has suffered direct attack. For centuries both government and religious authorities attacked the concept and severely persecuted those who held it. Why? The emphasis on the rights and responsibilities of the believer priest tended to threaten the power and control of those in authority. Even today those who fear freedom, dislike true democracy, and hunger for power



royal priesthood, a holy nation,
shew forth the praises of him who
ess into his marvelous light."

over the lives and thoughts of others still abhor the Baptist understanding of the priesthood of all believers.

Some would restrict the meaning of the priesthood of all believers. They are uncomfortable with the idea that each and every believer priest has a God-given competency to interpret the Bible under the leadership of the Holy Spirit: they prefer to place this responsibility in the hands of a pastor in a church, not the people who are members. Those who would restrict the meaning of the priesthood of all believers are also often uncomfortable with congregational church governance, that is the governance of a church by all of the members under the Lordship of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit; they advocate that the pastor or some small group in the church is to exercise authority over all the others.

However, such restrictive views would put in place a kind of spiritual elite over other believer priests. This is an idea alien to most Baptists who insist that no believer is to be over, or under, another. Pastors and other servant leaders have important roles and should be prayed for and their roles respected, Baptists affirm, but **believer priests ought to never surrender their responsibilities to others.**

Conclusion

So, which is it? Priesthood of **the believer** or priesthood of **believers**? It is not either/or but both/and.

The term “the priesthood of the believer” communicates the biblical emphasis on the individual and soul competency.

The term “priesthood of believers” communicates the biblical emphasis on community and fellowship.

Throughout history a tension has existed between the individual and the group. Baptists have not escaped this tension. We do well when we refuse to elevate one above the other, but instead attempt to keep them in balance.

For further information, see www.baptistdistinctives.org

The basic material in this leaflet originally appeared in a series of articles in the *Baptist Standard* in 2005. Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund to provide for publishing the series. He asked William M. Pinson, Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles. The financial assistance of The Prichard Family Foundation and Vester T. Hughes, Jr. enabled this series of nineteen leaflets to be produced based on the articles. Skyler G. Tinker designed and formatted the leaflets for publication. Each leaflet is for both individual and group study.

The topics in this series: (1) Baptists: Who? Where? What? Why? (2) What Makes a Baptist a Baptist? (3) The Lordship of Christ; (4) The Bible as Authority for Faith and Practice; (5) Soul Competency; (6) Salvation Only by Grace Through Faith; (7) The Priesthood of All Believers; (8) Believer's Baptism; (9) A Regenerate Church Membership; (10) Congregational Church Governance; (11) Church Autonomy; (12) Baptist Church Life: Organization, Worship, Officers, Ordinances; (13) Voluntary Cooperation; (14) Evangelism; (15) Missions; (16) Ministry; (17) Christian Education; (18) The Application of the Gospel; (19) Religious Freedom.

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