

Life Groups – For the Priesthood

Part 4: A Kingdom of Priests

An audio version of this teaching can be downloaded from
<http://cornerstonechurch.co.za/life-groups-priesthood-of-all-believers/>

In Part 3 we looked at how Life Groups function in the life of a church, using Cornerstone Bedfordview as an example. Now, this aspect of our Life Groups course focuses on the “Priesthood of all Believers” and their role in the church.

Priesthood of all believers?

The term “priesthood” can sound very religious and that often makes us lose the essence of what it means. And what it means is that God has got a calling and ministry for every believer in the church that lines up with what He has called the church to do – not just pastors/elders or deacons, but everyone. In the Bible, all Christians are called saints and 'priests'. It's the priests that cause the church to live in its fullness.

God is sovereign, so does He need us? Does he need this “priesthood of all believers”? Actually no, God is all sufficient and so needs nothing. But he chooses to use us as priests. He chooses to use believers who can partake and participate in the great work that He's doing on this earth. He longs for us to be involved in that which He is doing.

If we can grasp that we're not just a number in the Church but that God wants us to be involved in His purposes, we'll go on to complete God's calling for the Church. It doesn't matter who you are, God wants to use you and has a great purpose for your life.

The end-time revival that the Scriptures speak about will not be made up of a few big personalities but of every believer in the Church. It's often been said that God wants to raise a 'nameless and faceless' generation. God is committed to this. That doesn't mean he doesn't know your name or face, what it means is that he wants to use all believers as one group to fulfil his purpose. He wants all the glory at the end of the day, no person or group but God will get the glory.

So where does this term 'priesthood of all believers' originate from and what does it mean, exactly? Let's delve into more detail.

The Great Reformation

The doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' was re-discovered as part of the Great Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. You might recognise some of the well-known names behind the Reformation – Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Savonarola and others. Up until then it had generally been forgotten or neglected.

The church was effectively made up of two groups: the clergy and the laity. The reformers began to see in the Scriptures that this was never God's intention, and that changed everything.

The clergy did the ministry and were seemingly the 'called' ones – the ones who felt they were God's man or woman for the hour. The laity, which was everyone else (and the majority) had very little understanding of the things of God. They didn't even have access

to Scripture until the printing press which opened the way for the Bible to get into the hands of the common people. The world has never been the same since.

The Protestant Reformers grouped around five main beliefs which were:

- 1) *Sola Scriptura* (which means “by Scripture alone”). In other words, God's Word, not Tradition, is the final authority in all matters.
- 2) *Sola Fida* (which means “by faith alone:). This is the doctrine of 'justification by faith alone', where it's not our works that save us but faith in God, alone.
- 3) *Sola Gratia* (which means “by grace alone”). Much like *Sola Fida*, this is about the fact that it's not by our ability or effort but by God's grace that we are saved, and nothing but His grace.
- 4) *Sola Christo* (which means “through Christ alone”). This means that salvation is only found in Jesus.
- 5) *Sola Deo Gloria* (which means “Glory to God alone”). So all glory is for God and goes to God, not to a man, a movement, a church or anything else.

There were a number of things the Reformation opposed and a number of things it instituted in the church, many of which were re-discoveries of what Scripture says. Here are some of them:

- The centrality of preaching as opposed to a religious ritual. (We have to be careful that we don't allow ritual to get in the way of what God has for us and the Church, which can happen so easily.)
- Opposition to the mass (especially the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Jesus – known as transubstantiation)
- Opposition to purgatory (a place of temporary punishment)
- Opposition to praying to Mary and the Saints
- The reformation established the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, as opposed to the need for an earthly person to serve as a mediator between us and God. Jesus alone is the mediator between God and man, not a priest or any other.

It's always been God's intention to use a “Kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6; Rev 1:6; 1 Peter 2:5,9) where all of those in his Church – his chosen people; his 'nation' – are involved in what He is doing.

1 Peter 2:5—9

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

1 John 2: 22 – 27

22 Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. 23 No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. 24 Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. 25 And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.

26 I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. 27 But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him.

As you can see in verse 27, we all have an anointing of God that remains with us. We're anointed to serve and minister as this Kingdom of Priests in God.

In Phil 1:1 the letter starts off with Paul and Timothy addressing the “saints” in Christ Jesus. It's interesting to note that the saints get the first mention in the letter before the elders and deacons. Why? Because the saints are the most important. This is the people that God has raised up to serve him, advance His kingdom, and make a difference. Deacons and overseers are offices and functions in a local church, but the priesthood of all believers is the “A-team”.

Corruption of the priesthood of all believers

If we trace carefully how this truth was neglected and forgotten until the Reformation we can see certain key factors and worldly ideas that can corrupt our understanding. We have to be careful and not let these things come into our hearts and thinking otherwise our understanding will be corrupted just like it was in the past.

So what can corrupt and undermine our understanding of our function as priests?

- **A religious spirit.** We can become Pharisaical in our understanding and pick up autocratic models of church governance. From there, combining church and state and pegging people at different levels and positions is an obvious outcome.
- **Secularisation of the church.** This is when we begin to apply worldly principles and methods to the church. Once again we establish a hierarchy and we attach importance to position and profile. We may even adapt business models to the church.
- **Fallen human nature**, which defaults to:
 - **Hierarchy.** In Rev 2: 6, 15 Jesus talks about the “Nicolaitans”, who's practices he hates. When you look at what that means it literally breaks down into 'clergy' and 'laity'. We can see that God hates this practice of hierarchy, of setting certain groups of people above another. There's no such thing in the New Testament as a separate clergy and laity. Jesus also addresses this in Matthew 23.
 - **Making Christianity a spectator sport.** We pay to see the show up front and we come to church to receive, not give! People sit in the grand-stand of the churches and either cheer or boo in their hearts. That's sad. We think

that someone's getting paid to perform behind the MIC or with their instruments and we're here just to watch it. We come with an attitude of "what am I going to get today?" But the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers says "what am I going to give today?" We have to move away from being spectators to participators.

- **Apathy and lukewarmness.** Not many in the Church read their Bibles for themselves. Despite all our access to information our generation is very Bible illiterate. A noted Bible teacher has said that not since the Great Reformation has there been such Biblical illiteracy! This prevents us functioning properly. Prayerlessness is another fruit of apathy and lukewarmness. Where there's no conviction we operate out of convenient and comfort; but the "priesthood of all believers" says we operate out of conviction and commitment.
- **We want superstars.** Superstars always lead to titles and hierarchy and so it goes.

The role of leadership

Ephesians 4: 11-16

11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Who is God's people? Us, the priests. We are prepared for works of service. Why? So that the body of Christ may be built up. Until when? Until unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. So, leadership in the life of the church is to grow us all into these things, as the scripture above so clearly states.

Leaders (elders and deacons) are to:

1. Set the priesthood free and keep them free

Perhaps you've heard the statement that what you get saved out of isn't as important as what you get saved into. It's true. If you get saved into something legalistic and full of bondage, it's a tragedy. The role of leaders is to set you free and keep you free.

That doesn't mean leaders let you do whatever you want. There are banks to every river – we want the river of God to flow, so the life of God must be channelled so you can live in the fullness God has for you. So leaders give handles and help, but we never want to put you into bondage. That's not God's intention or ours.

2. Build everyone into Christ and not themselves

In essence leaders are sign posts to help you on your journey, keeping your eyes on Jesus. We aren't able to always hear God for you but we can hopefully teach you how to hear God for yourself. We can't work your salvation out for you, you have to do that. We can't make you drink water, you have to. But in this leaders must build away from themselves and build you into Christ.

3. Equip the saints for the work of ministry and their function

God wants you to function. We aren't going to equip you to sit, soak and then sour. You've been saved for God's purpose. When your purpose submits to God's purpose then you hit first prize.

4. Build up the Body of Christ

Leaders want to build up this body of Christ so we – this whole body – can be what God has purposed and called us to be, together. Leaders therefore help you find something of your call and purpose and direct you in the way you can go. This is all done so that the body is healthy, so that you're healthy and strong, faithful, prophetic, loving and so on.

5. Bring the priesthood to maturity

Leaders bring the priesthood to maturity, so that – as the Scripture above says – we're not infants tossed about by every wind and wave of doctrine. God wants us to come to a place of maturity. It's God's ongoing desire that we move to maturity.

Babies are lovely and cute, but it's not so wonderful when someone at 16 is still in nappies! So why, as believers, are we happy with that being the case spiritually?

What are we called to do as priests?

1. We're called to belong to the family of God.

Priests are not lone rangers, people who work and operate in isolation. We have to integrate. That's why the word priesthood speaks of a unity and collectivity. God's intention is that we operate as a tribe and a family. We need to understand community and family and covenantal relationships.

2. We need to be a contributing part of the body

Yes, we need to integrate, but then we need to begin to function as a member of the body. Paul uses a whole chapter in 1 Cor 12 to talk about that. There is one body but there are many parts of it that make up this body. If the body is going to be functioning, healthy and whole then every single part is vitally important. When a part is missing or a part is not playing their part, the whole body suffers.

3. We are to reflect the holiness of God

And that of our high priest, Jesus. We do this by living holy lives. Many scriptures attest to that. God has set us apart from sin and impurity for His own purposes – to serve him and honour him and represent him well. We are transformed with ever-increasing glory (2 Cor 3:18).

4. Offer praises to God

Hebrews 13:15

Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

That's what we do. Not only on a Sunday but we should look for every opportunity. It says we must do it continually – even in the tough times and the dry seasons.

5. We are called to work out our own salvation

And we do it with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12 – 13). You and I must take responsibility for our own salvation and progress in the things of God. Don't blame your Life Group leader if you aren't growing spiritually.

6. We intercede for men before God

Part of our role is we stand in the gap on behalf of others. This is the gap of prayer. We are a praying people. As Jesus intercedes at the right hand of the father we take up his example and intercede for people. See Romans 1:9 where Paul clearly understood what it meant to intercede as a priest.

7. We are to represent and present God before men

By sharing the Gospel in word and deed. It's not just an internal thing, or what we practice on Sunday, but something we live outside of the halls of the Church. We are here to present God to man – representing speaks of our lifestyle; presenting means we have to talk and challenge. Priests make Him known.

So how do we do these things?

1. Get free and stay free.

Read the book of Galatians and see the challenge. It's for freedom that we have been set free. We're free from all sorts of things that want to put us back into bondage and legalism and slavery. So let's stay free and not go back to those things.

2. Become Bible literate

That's how we become this priesthood of all believers. Like Paul said in Col 3 – let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.

3. Develop your own relationship with God and your own convictions

First-hand revelation is always the best. Second-hand isn't ours and when we try and live off someone else's revelation we wonder why we're not getting anywhere.

4. Live a devoted life from the inside-out.

Remember your devotion times! They are paramount!

5. Integrate into the body of Christ

Integrate into Life Groups. Otherwise you remain a visitor for the rest of your life and that's not God's intention or purpose.

6. Get involved and function

Use what God has given you; serve wherever the need is, wherever you find the opportunity. You don't have to wait to ask to serve.

7. Use what God's given you

He has given us all gifts, talents and the like. The parable in Matt 25 of the talent is a very good one for this context. Those that were commended used the talents they received. But the third buried and ignored his talent. And the master refers to him as a wicked, lazy servant. If you don't use it you're going to lose it and you don't want that. God has blessed you with it, so use it!

8. Work out your calling

Every call is important and needed in the life of the Church. Work it out, develop it, grow in it. Not just the gift and ability but the call to open things up to advance the Kingdom.