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The Priesthood of All Believers

“THE Priesthood of all Believers.” It seems an innocuous enough phrase today—a piece of theological tradition worn smooth with the years, and able to be taken for granted. But history shows that this phrase conceals explosive forces, and that it has been capable in times past of kindling the passions of men in an extraordinary degree, and of inspiring them with a courage and devotion of the rarest kind. The phrase is in fact more like a battle cry than a dogma, and if we do not feel its power today as our fathers did, that is partly because conditions have changed. The actual principles involved are as vital as ever, and it may be that, with a change of social climate, we shall once more realise in a new way their great power.

The idea of the priesthood of all believers is biblical, and the Church Fathers recognised it in a general way as a kind of ideal. Tertullian, in his Montanist days, was specially attracted by it, though he did not make much of it. It was with Martin Luther and the era of the Protestant Reformation that the notion really came into its own. For then men realised that here was a scriptural principle which on the one hand expressed something vital about God and their relations to Him, while on the other it pointed the way to a remedy for the great religious evils of their day.

The phrase “Priesthood of all Believers” is based upon a passage in the second chapter of *1 Peter*, although there are echoes of it also in the *Apocalypse* of St. John (chapters i., v. and xx.). The writer of *1 Peter* is trying to get his readers to appreciate the immense significance of their position as members of the Christian Church, and he borrows for this purpose certain metaphors originally applied in the Old Testament to the Jews. Christians must realise—he says in effect—that in the inscrutable wisdom of God the Christian Church has now been given the place in the Divine economy originally intended for Israel. The Jews were called by God (according to *Exodus* xix. 6) to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” and they had forfeited their position by rejecting Jesus Christ. Now by the grace of God the members of the Christian Church have been promoted to that position. They are a holy community called out from mankind to serve God as their king. They are “an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (*1 Peter* ii. 9). They are to be so united by faith through Jesus Christ that they grow up

together in Him like "living stones," as it were, in a temple destined for the worship and service of God (ii. 5). As the author of the *Apocalypse* puts it: Christ "made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father" (i. 6).

The fundamental idea is thus both simple and profound. It is that the Christian Church is a corporate body called into being by God through His Son that it may worship and serve Him, or—as St. Peter puts it—"to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ," and to "show forth the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light" (1 Peter ii. 5/9). The actual nature of these spiritual sacrifices is not specified, but I think those commentators are right who understand St. Peter to refer, not to ritual actions but rather to living service which the Church is to offer to God. In the light of these and other relevant passages we may say that the New Testament recognises two and only two kinds of priesthood which are of enduring significance. First and foremost there is the Priesthood of Jesus Christ, with which the Epistle to the Hebrews in particular is very deeply concerned. He is our great High Priest, whose sacrifice of Himself once for all on the Cross was accepted by God as a final and sufficient offering for the sins of the whole world. This offering is continued still in the unseen for, as *Hebrews* vii. 25 puts it: "He is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through Him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." In Trinitarian language, we might say that in the triune Being of the Godhead, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are eternally active in that relationship of mutual self-giving which is perfect Love. In addition to this priestly work of Christ, however, and as an outcome of it, the New Testament speaks also of a priestly service which the Church of Christ is expected to render as the manifestation of her union with her Lord. That living expression of the Church's love and duty towards her Master is in fact the "royal priesthood," as St. Peter calls it, which is the equivalent of the Priesthood of all Believers.

This Christian priesthood differs from that so constantly referred to in the Old Testament in three significant respects: First, unlike the Jewish priesthood, it is based solely upon the atoning work of Jesus. His perfect offering of Himself on the cross fulfilled the ancient Jewish sacrifices, satisfied the requirements of the law, and fully accomplished what the Jewish sacrifices had only symbolised and prefigured. Thus there is no longer any further need or room for sacrifices of the Old Testament pattern. Secondly, the Priesthood of all Believers is a service to God which is not confined simply to certain representative officials, but which is expected from all God's people. No one can contract out of it. Every believer is included in the benefits of Christ's passion and

death, and equally every believer must render to his Master that form of service which he is best fitted to offer to the glory of God. This service of believers is essentially a corporate offering made by persons who know themselves to be bound together in a living community through faith and love for Jesus Christ. "Such a priesthood," says Dr. Hort, "is doubtless shared by each member of the community in due measure, but only insofar as he is virtually an organ of the whole body; and the universality of the function is compatible with variations of mode and degree as to its exercise" (Commentary). It is a priesthood of the whole Church. Finally, the Christian priesthood differs from that of Israel inasmuch as it is fulfilled, not in ritual acts alone but in personal service for God as wide and as varied as life itself. F. W. Beare calls attention to the fact that "the Greek word *hiereus*—meaning priest—was never taken over by the Church to denote any office or function in its own ministry" (Commentary). So when St. John says that Christ made us "to be priests (*hiereis*) unto his God and Father," he did not mean that as Christians we are appointed to perform certain ceremonial rites, but rather that, as members of the Church of Christ, we are empowered and obliged by His Spirit to make of our lives a sacrificial gift acceptable to God. Compare the words of St. Paul to his readers at Rome: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (xii. 1).

WATCHWORD OF REFORM

So much then for priesthood as it is understood in the New Testament. According to Dr. T. M. Lindsay, this interpretation was generally accepted also in the early years of the life of the Church. "The idea of the priesthood of all believers was firmly rooted in the thoughts of the early Christians even although the constant use of the Old Testament naturally led them from a very early period to draw some comparisons between the leaders of their public devotions and the priests and Levites of the Jewish Church." There was, says Dr. Lindsay, some growth of superstitious accretions. Yet notwithstanding this, "the evangelical thought that the sacrifices of the New Covenant are the worship of the people, and that the priesthood is the whole worshipping congregation was always the ruling idea" (*Church and Ministry*, pp. 307-9). In the course of succeeding centuries, however, the situation underwent a radical change, and a change very much for the worse. It would probably be widely accepted that the third century and, in particular, the teaching of Bishop Cyprian of Carthage marked an important stage in the development of the new outlook. It was from that point onwards that priesthood

came to be identified with a certain class of church officers who were regarded more and more as indispensable mediators between God and the believer, and indeed as judges in Christ's stead. By the 16th century the results of this development had so disordered the life of the Church that pressure towards reform had reached breaking-point. It only required the (at first) moderate proposals of Martin Luther to set in motion forces which disrupted Western Christendom, and in due time gave birth to the great Protestant communions which we know today. The important point for our purpose is that one of the great watchwords of the new Reform Movement was the Priesthood of all Believers. The whole historical situation prior to the Reformation is immensely rich and complicated, but it will be helpful to quote the very careful and not unsympathetic judgment of Dr. R. C. Moberly :

"There can I suppose be no doubt that, at least to a considerable section of popular unreformed thought, the Priesthood was mechanical, and the Sacraments material, to an extraordinary degree; that outward observance had constantly taken the place of spirituality; that superstitious formalism, hard, cold and unintelligent, had proved too often the paralysis of personal religion; that the Mass was too often, much in the heathen sense, or the Old Testament manner at its worst, a completed sacrifice—i.e. an outward performance of intrinsic efficacy, to be so many times repeated, with a value arithmetically calculable; and so that the Priest stood as a real intermediary between the *plebs Christiana* and its God—to make, by sacrifice, atonement for sin." (*Ministerial Priesthood*, c. vii.).

These are strong words which Dr. Moberly does not use without recognising also what must be said on the other side. His judgment is that the violence of the Protestant reformation is best explicable as a reaction against a religious situation which had become literally intolerable to the common man.

"The full force of this eager destructiveness turned itself most of all against everything which was connected in popular feeling with Purgatory, and the Mass, and sacrificing Priesthood. Nothing indeed but the hideous exaggerations connected in popular feeling with this whole phraseology could fully account for the abiding savageness of the popular instinct against it." (*ib.*).

It would be a mistake to suppose that Martin Luther was the first to protest against the existing state of affairs. For centuries past, little groups of persons, of whom the Anabaptists were the latest, many of them of humble origin, had borne their witness to truth at the cost of great persecution and suffering. Both the English Reformer, John Wyclif, and, later, the Continental scholars, Erasmus and Zwingli, laboured in the interests of reform. But Luther, it seems, supplied the requisite dynamic; and it was in Luther's teaching about the Priesthood of all believers, in particular, that men recognised once more the authentic accents of New Testament Christianity. Here are some of the things which

this young monk said about the Priesthood and about priests in the earliest days of the Reformation :

"How if they were compelled to admit that *we all, so many as have been baptized, are equally priests?* . . . Thus it is said, 'Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation' (1 Peter ii, 9). Thus all we who are Christians are priests; those whom we call priests are ministers chosen from among us to do all things in our name, and the priesthood is nothing else than a ministry." (*Bab. Captivity*, 396).

"However sacred and lofty may be the works of priests or of the religious orders, they differ not at all in the sight of God from the works of a husbandman labouring in his field, or of a woman attending to her household affairs" (*ib.*, 362).

"Since what we call the priesthood is a ministry, I do not see at all for what reason a man who has once been made priest cannot become a layman again, since *he differs in no wise from a layman, except by his ministerial office*" (*ib.*, 400).

"Therefore a priest should be nothing in Christendom but a functionary. . . . It follows, then, that between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, or . . . between spiritual and temporal persons, *the only real difference is one of office and function, and not of estate*" (*Add. to the Nobility*, p. 164).

Is it any wonder in the face of such a challenge that the rulers of the Church of Luther's day did their best to silence him? Professor G. D. Henderson issues a salutary warning when he says :

"The Reformer at first expressed himself with impartial enthusiasm and sweeping vigour, but he [later] panicked into a conservatism that came to involve state control and clerical officialism, and an externalism almost as strangulating as that from which he escaped." (*Scot. Journal of Theol.*, March, 1954).

Yet Luther was really only saying at first in his own way what we have already seen to be the teaching of the New Testament. As Dr. Beard says :

"The Counter-Reformation removed many practical abuses, and might have proceeded to legalise even the marriage of the clergy, without touching the essential principle of Catholic Christianity. That principle is the nourishing of the religious life by sacraments, which can be duly administered only by a sacerdotal order. Whatever church says and means 'priest' is on the Catholic side of the great controversy of Christianity; whatever church says and means 'minister,' in that act proclaims itself Protestant" (*The Reformation*, p. 135).

CONSEQUENCES OF ERROR

Although Luther recalled men once more to the New Testament teaching about Christian Priesthood, he could not undo at one stroke the consequences of centuries of error, and it will be worth while to pause for a moment to consider two of those consequences from which we still suffer today. One of them is the simple fact that for very many Protestants the word "priest" carries still such painful associations that they find it hard to accept heartily the idea of the priestly function even of the Church.

No doubt the phrase "the Priesthood of all Believers" is a Protestant slogan; but it is questionable whether its meaning is generally understood, and there is a widespread tendency to give it an individualistic twist which is anything but Christian. In the New Testament, as we have seen, the governing idea is that the Christian Church as a whole is dedicated to the service of Almighty God. Her members are bound together as a spiritual community rooted in Christ, and so they are "a royal priesthood, a holy nation," whose task it is to worship and serve God throughout the whole range of life's duties and opportunities. In that sense it is true to say that all believers are priests. But they are not priests in their own private right, i.e. as independent individuals. They are truly priests only as they are loyal fellow-members in the Church which is the Body of Christ, and as they share in a sacrificial activity which is common to all, and is inspired by the indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit. In that way and in that way alone, can they be delivered from an individualism which is none the less wrong because it disguises itself as religious, and be baptized into the self-giving activity of the Spirit of Christ. This truth was well expressed by the late Principal Fairbairn when, in contrasting the witness of evangelical Christianity with the affirmations of Anglo-Catholicism, he said :

"Further, over against their official priesthood, let us place the spiritual priesthood, the office and function at once common and sacred to all believers. . . . Let us create in our little churches the feeling, certain to lift them above all littleness of spirit or of speech, that they are priestly bodies, where every man by watching and prayer, by personal communion with God and loving intercourse with men, can help to work the reconciliation of humanity and God" (*Studies in Religion and Theology*, p. 138).

The second unfortunate consequence following upon the great controversy about priesthood has been to cast doubt into many minds concerning the subject of the Christian Ministry. In fact, one not infrequently finds the phrase "the Priesthood of all Believers" made a ground for questioning the need or justification for a separated Ministry. Yet that is certainly not the view of the New Testament, which regards the Church's ministry as the gift of Christ to His people (*Ephes. iv. 11ff.*). Nor did the Reformers, in standing for the priesthood of all believers, intend to decry the office of the Ministry. On the contrary, they took pains to assert its necessity. But they did so in terms which ought to relieve any anxiety that they were attempting to fasten a new yoke upon the Church. For the real point of their contention is that the Ministry is not a status but an office in the Church.

"Let every man then," says Luther, "who has learnt that he is a Christian recognise what he is, and be certain that we are all equally priests, i.e. that we have the same power in the Word and in any

sacrament whatever, although it is not lawful for anyone to use this power except with the consent of the community or at the call of a superior. For that which belongs to all in common no individual can arrogate to himself until he be called. And therefore the Sacrament of Orders, if it is anything, is nothing but a certain rite by which men are called to minister in the Church" (*Bab. Cap.*, p. 399).

In a similar way, according to Professor Henderson: "Calvinistic tradition maintains that the New Testament knows nothing of any priests but the believers who constitute the Christian community; but on biblical grounds it steadily insists upon a divinely called as well as a duly qualified, ordained and elected ministry" (*Scot. J. Theol.*, March, 1954). Of course there is always the danger, as Milton said, that new Presbyter may be but old Priest writ large. But that is only because it is just as easy for presbyters as for priests to mistake their true standing in the life of the Church. The actual situation could not be better expressed than in the following words of a German scholar:

"The relationship of the priesthood of all believers to the activity of the Church may be stated best by saying that while genuine Christian piety in the individual believer is the necessary presupposition for all service on behalf of the Church, it is not sufficient in itself, but must be completed by the requisite training and development before the Church is justified in authorising its public exercise. The individual Christian is assured through his 'priesthood' of immediate access to God without any human intermediary, and on this basis he is personally responsible for his own religious and moral development. Nevertheless, it must be understood that this right does not relieve him of the duty of playing his due part in the life of the Church and of the community, and also of learning from the judgement of others" (*Schian, R.G.G.*, IV, 1495).

In passing we may say that this was substantially the position of our Baptist forefathers although they would not all have expressed themselves in quite the same way. The latest Baptist Union statement (1948) on the subject says:

"It is the church which preaches the Word and celebrates the sacraments, and it is the church which, through pastoral oversight, feeds the flock and ministers to the world. It normally does these things through the person of its minister, but not solely through him. Any member of the church may be authorised by it, on occasion, to exercise the functions of the ministry, in accordance with the principle of the priesthood of all believers. . . . Baptists, however, have had from the beginning an exalted conception of the office of the Christian minister and have taken care to call men to serve as pastors. The minister's authority to exercise his office comes from the call of God in his personal experience, but this call is tested and approved by the church of which he is a member and (as is increasingly the rule) by the representatives of a large group of churches."

Even in this statement there may be detected a slight tendency to confuse the Priesthood of all Believers with ministerial office. That is quite easy to do, for, as we have seen, these two

things are integrally connected. Nevertheless, they are not identical, and the distinction between them needs to be kept clear. The Priesthood of all Believers, in so far as it is applied to individuals, is the indispensable qualification for ministerial office of any kind in the Christian Church. The office itself, whatever it may be, is an additional opportunity to serve which may only be conferred by the Church acting in the Name of Christ. What one finds a little surprising in Reformed statements generally is that not only the administration of the sacraments but also the preaching of the Word is placed under the control of the Church. One would have thought that, with the example of the Old Testament prophets before them, our fathers would have distinguished between these two ministerial functions in such a way as to admit greater freedom in the one case than in the other. But perhaps the situation described by St. Paul at Corinth was not exceptional, and the Church had early to learn by bitter experience that it was not in the best interests of the kingdom of God that the decision "to preach or not to preach" should be left to the unaided judgment of the individual believer. In this as in other respects a man's personal sense of call to public work is not infallible, but should be checked by the judgment of the church.

CONCLUSIONS

Four brief conclusions seem to emerge.

(1) There can be no true relationship between man and God which does not finally rest upon the sole mediatorship of Christ. The Gospel accords to man, both individually and corporately, an extraordinary freedom of access by faith to God—nothing less in fact than the freedom of a child in his father's house—and this in spite of God's holiness and man's continuing sinfulness. This is a paradox which is in fact resolved by the simple, yet sufficient, requirement that the believer's approach to God must always be through Christ. No human mediator is required, or can indeed be tolerated, without violating what our fathers called the "Crown Rights of the Redeemer." Man's freedom and competency in the things of religion derive solely from the Lord Jesus Christ and it is only because we have in Him such a High Priest that we can "draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace" (*Heb. iv. 16*).

(2) If we are to recover for our day the true significance of Priesthood, we must first ask what it meant for Jesus. We are told that Cyprian modelled his conception of the priesthood upon the hierarchical system of the Old Testament. But that was surely the wrong place to begin, as the subsequent history of Cyprian's ideas goes to prove. Christians are to be ruled by Jesus Christ and not by the Old Testament. Therefore, if we ask what the Gospel means by Priesthood we must look to the teaching and

ministry, the passion and death of our Master for the answer. When we do that, we see at once how revolutionary was the change which Jesus wrought. He broke down once for all the barrier between the sacred and the secular. He fulfilled his priestly mission for God most characteristically not in the Temple but in the villages and by the lakeside of Galilee. He was at His priestly work not only when he was praying for men or shedding His blood on their behalf, but as He moved amongst them teaching, healing, forgiving and strengthening them in the love of God. All was done as an offering to His heavenly Father in brotherly love towards, and on behalf of, men. His compassion flowed out to all in ceaseless benediction, such as recalls the beautiful image of Keats :

“The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth’s human shores.”

The Epistle to the Hebrews was right when it says : “We have not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (iv. 15). Thus, to sum up, we may say : The priesthood of Jesus was set squarely in the context of a sinful, suffering world, which it was His mission to redeem and bring to God. Worship and service were its twin principles. And since the servant is not greater than his Lord, every other priesthood worthy of the name must be based on that pattern, and draw its strength from that divine Spring. For His word to His disciples was : “As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you” (*John* xx. 21). “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation” (*Mark* xvi. 15).

(3) We have seen that Christian Priesthood is essentially the priesthood of the Church living in the midst of men to minister to them in the name of Christ, the King. He Himself laid down the outline of this priestly task. It remains for the priesthood of all believers, through prayer and love and service, to fill in that outline, and to give content to the Master’s will. (We may recall here the words of St. Paul : “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body’s sake, which is the Church” (*Coloss.* i. 24).) That being so, it is vital that the responsibility for this task should be shared by all believers. The Church is not a collection of individuals, any one of whom may be ignored without loss. It is a living organism in which, as in a human body, every member counts, so that as St. Paul remarked : “All the body fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplieth . . . maketh increase of the body . . . in love” (*Eph.* iv. 16). Experience has shown that the attempt to concen-

trate power in the hands of a special priestly caste within the Church sets up tensions which are fatal to peace and unity, and hinder the progress of the kingdom of God. The energies of the whole Church are intended to be engaged, and it should be one of the chief tasks of ecclesiastical statesmanship to bring this about. Human nature is such that some Christians have to be exhorted to take their rightful share in the work of the Church while, for others, the temptation is of another sort, so that they tend to appropriate to themselves more power than they can rightly use. It belongs to the wisdom of the Church to adjust the balance fairly, and to see that the maximum use is made of all the resources available. For example, we shall never know what the cause of Christ through the centuries has lost through the Church's failure on the one hand to enlist fully the co-operation of her lay members, and on the other to make adequate use of the ministry of women. It may be true that some believers have little to offer. But, as members of the Church, that is nothing like so important as that they should identify themselves wholeheartedly with the common task, and be encouraged to make their own particular contribution to it.

(4) Finally, in the discharge of her priestly mission, the Church stands in constant need of trained leadership; or, to put it another way, whatever the difficulties connected with the regular Ministry, and they are many—the Church cannot dispense with the services of specially gifted persons qualified to undertake the highest functions in her economy. The preaching of the Gospel, the conduct of public worship, the teaching of the Bible, the care of the flock—these are highly responsible duties necessary to the life of the Church, and requiring a skill and experience beyond the competence of the majority of Christian believers. Those to whom the Church entrusts these functions are not priests in any sense different from that in which, as we have seen, all believers are priests. They are, to quote St. Paul: "Your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 *Cor.* iv. 5). But as leaders whom Christ has given to His Church they are rightly to be held in honour, and no pains must be spared both to secure the finest material for the service of the Gospel, and to give to the Church's ministers the training and support they need.

"Unto Him who 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."

R. L. CHILD