

The Priesthood of all Believers

Introduction

Under the old covenant, the priesthood went hand in hand with the law: ‘On the basis of it the law was given to the people’ (Heb. 7:11). That is, not only did the law rest on the priesthood, but in an on-going sense Israel received the law through the ministration of the priesthood. God, of course, had given his law to Israel, and only to Israel (Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5, and so on), as a temporary measure to last until the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:19). In the fullness of time (Mark 1:15; Gal. 4:4; 1 Tim. 2:6; Tit. 1:3), God, in accordance with his eternal plan, graciously sent his Son into the world to fulfil the old covenant, render it obsolete, and bring in the new (Rom. 10:4; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Gal. 3:19,23-25; Eph. 2:14-15; Heb. 7:12,18-19,22; 8:6-13; 9:10; 10:15-18). All believers, being members of this glorious new covenant (Rom. 6:14-18; 7:4-6; 8:2; 2 Cor. 3:6-9; Gal. 2:19-20; 5:18), are new-covenant priests, in accordance with God’s promise: ‘He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness’ (Mal. 3:3). And it is not only that every individual believer is a new-covenant priest: each believer is a member of the new-covenant priesthood, that priesthood being both mutual in the assembly and individual and personal.

My purpose in publishing this article¹ is to introduce this largely unknown, forgotten or ignored – but glorious – aspect of the new covenant to as wide an audience as possible; or at least, to remind believers of their heritage. If you are a believer, you are a spiritual priest in company with all your fellow-believers. Exercise your God-given ministry, brother and sister, both individually and corporately!

¹ What follows is taken from my *The Pastor: Does He Exist?* pp19-33, lightly edited. For a fuller setting out of this important aspect of the new covenant, see my *The Priesthood of All Believers: Slogan or Substance?*.

Let me conclude this introduction by quoting John Calvin (in his comments on Hebrews 7):

Now, as some might doubt whether the abolition of the law followed the abolition of the priesthood, [the writer to the Hebrews] says that the law was not only brought in under it, but that it was also by it established. ‘For the priesthood being changed, or, transferred, *etc.*’: As the authority of the law and the priesthood is the same, Christ became not only a priest, but also a lawgiver... The sum of the whole is, that the ministry of Moses was no less temporary than that of Aaron; and hence both were annulled by the coming of Christ, for the one could not stand without the other... That law,² as it was subordinate to the ancient priesthood, was abolished when the priesthood was abolished. And Christ, being made a priest, was invested also with the authority of a legislator, that he might be the teacher and interpreter of the new covenant.

The priesthood of all believers

Writing to believers, Peter declared: ‘As you come to him, the living stone... you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation... the people of God’ (1 Pet. 2:4-10). See also Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6. Hence, ‘the priesthood of all believers’.

From the outset, I want to stress that ‘the priesthood of all believers’ describes not only the believer’s individual experience, but stress the vital role it plays (or should play!) in the corporate life of believers, the church.³ The fact is, I am not talking about the priesthood of *the* believer. I am, of course, but rather I am talking about the corporate, the mutual priesthood of *all* believers.

² Calvin, as to be expected, tried in vain to exempt ‘the moral law’.

³ I would like to drop ‘church’ and use *ekklēsia*, but I feel I ought to continue to use the language familiar to the overwhelming majority. I say this because ‘church’, today, is largely part and parcel of institutional Christianity – Christendom. And Christendom has done much harm, over many centuries, to the cause of Christ in general, and to the individual believer in particular – to say nothing of the appalling affect it has had on unbelievers.

Notice how Peter expresses it: Believers, he says, ‘like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (1 Pet. 2:5). The ‘stones’ are, in the first instance, individuals; they are individual believers. The truth is, each believer is ‘a temple of the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor. 6:19). But one of the glories of the new covenant is that these individual believers, these individual stones, these individual temples, are all fitted together by God, the great master-builder, to form a spiritual house, a spiritual temple (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:16; Gal. 6:10 (AV, NKJV, NASB); Eph. 2:22; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6). And believers, all believers, who form this temple, are, all of them, the priests who offer spiritual sacrifices to God within that temple. Hence the corporate or collective nature of ‘the priesthood of all believers’. We are talking about believers as a ‘priesthood’ – not merely as individual priests. The emphasis in 1 Peter 2:9-10 is unmistakably corporate.

Moreover, while it is true that all believers, everywhere, constitute this one universal temple and priesthood, we can only experience the manifestation of this corporate spiritual priesthood within the local assemblies of God’s people – in each particular church, in every separate church. This is what Christ intended and set up. Every believer, therefore, has a privileged part to play in this local expression of the communal ‘priesthood of *all* believers’ – each believer being a living stone in the temple and, at the same, time, one of the priests sacrificing within that temple. What is more, each believer is at the same time part of the sacrifice (Rom. 12:1). And all of it is ‘living’ – ‘living’ stones, a ‘living’ sacrifice, in the temple of the ‘living’ God, the church of the ‘living’ God, in the city of the ‘living’ God, serving the ‘living’ and true God, all through a new and ‘living’ way, founded on Christ the ‘living’ stone (Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 10:20; 12:22; 1 Pet. 2:4-5). Living! We are not talking about a mechanical organisation, but an organism, a living body. And ‘the priesthood of all believers’ plays an integral part, a vital part, a ‘living’ part, in it all. This concept of church life is written large across the New Testament; namely, the total involvement of

believers in the worship and service of God. Christ stipulates that *all* his people must be wholly involved in it all.

All believers – both men and women – are priests. All sacrifice – in a spiritual way, of course. Let me explain. All believers have a service to perform for God. There are no exceptions, no special cases. God has made all his people priests. Private judgement, prayer (including public prayer meetings), gospel service, mutual instruction, reproof and edification, practical care of the saints, daily holiness and dedication to God, financial support of the gospel and its ministers or servants, true spiritual humility... these are not just for the few to be concerned about, the fanatical super-saints. They comprise the duty which God demands of *all* his people; he has made them *all* priests, and expects *all* of them to offer the sacrifices that he has commanded. There is no opting out, no holiday, no retirement. All God's people, all their days, carry the responsibilities and privileges of being priests; they all engage in priestly duty in serving God. Or should do.

And it is not just a duty. It is a privilege. In making the believer a member of his royal priesthood, Christ has bestowed a dignity second-to-none upon him/her, a dignity beyond description. Such dignity is the right and privilege of each and every believer.

But, of course, being a royal priest carries responsibilities. In particular, I stress that, although (as I will show) God raises up stated and recognised teachers in his church (and these must be men), all believers are, in the proper sense, teaching ministers. And this includes both men and women. Yes, it does! Women, under certain circumstances, as well as men, were teachers in the first churches (Tit. 2:3-5). Both Priscilla and Aquila (note the order) (Acts 18:24-28) helped the eloquent Apollos, by teaching him in their home. In the scriptures which follow, there is no suggestion that I can see that women are excluded.

All believers are gifted and appointed by Christ so that they may mutually⁴ edify one another. This is their duty. This is their privilege. Another way of describing this is to call it 'an all-body ministry', 'a one-another ministry', 'an each-and-every-member ministry', as set out, say, in such passages as Romans 12:3-8;

⁴ 'Reciprocal' is probably more accurate than 'mutual', but it seems to me that 'mutual' is winning the day. See Rom. 1:12; 14:19; 1 Cor. 7:5.

15:14; 1 Corinthians 1:4-7; 12:4-31; 14:1-40; Galatians 6:1-2,10; Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11,14-15; 1 Peter 2:2-5; 4:7-11; Jude 20-23. This is only a sample; the New Testament is replete with the concept. Consider *allēlōn*, ‘of one another’. This word, which speaks of ‘reciprocally, mutually’, appears often in the New Testament, twenty-three times in sections which deal with admonition.

All believers are teaching ministers. In saying that, I am not suggesting that all are able to address a congregation, but no child of God is without some ability to pass on a word of experience, a word of encouragement, instruction, comfort, reproof... to a fellow-believer. Let me emphasise this, even though I know it will sound startling to some, perhaps many. But Scripture is rich on the subject:

I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith... For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith [or, in agreement with the faith]. If it is serving [ministry, NKJV], let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully... I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another (Rom. 1:11-12; 12:3-8; 15:14).

I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge... Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift... There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service [ministries, NKJV], but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good... The same Spirit... gives... to each one, just as he determines... God has arranged the parts in the body, every

one of them, just as he wanted them to be (1 Cor. 1:4-7; 12:1-31, especially 4-7,11,18).

Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant (2 Cor. 3:5-6).

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people, and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit... But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it... It was he who gave some... to prepare God's people for works of service [for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, NKJV], so that the body of Christ may be built up... From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work [by which every part does its share, NKJV]... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit [impart grace to, NKJV] those who listen... Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 2:19-22; 4:7-16,29; 5:18-21).

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:15-17).

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing... warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else (1 Thess. 5:11,14-15).

Like newborn babes, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, the living stone – rejected by men but chosen by God, and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... Pray.

Above all, love each other deeply... Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace [minister it to one another, NKJV] in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves [ministers, NKJV], he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen (1 Pet. 2:2-5; 4:7-11).

But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh (Jude 20-23).

Is that not proof enough?

It is, I say, abundantly clear: All the saints are ministers, priests; all engage in ministry; all are responsible and gifted to be able to be a part of the mutual nourishing of the body of Christ. Note the emphasis, 'to each one'. To each believer, Christ gives a gift or gifts so that each might serve the church. These passages tell us that *all* the saints are ministers, *all* are engaged in the ministry. In a few moments, I will be speaking about apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors-and-teachers⁵ who are given by Christ to the churches, and who are used by him in order to equip the saints for this work of the ministry (Eph. 4:11-16). But do not miss the vital point: Christ gives such teachers to his people *for the very purpose of fitting believers – all of them – to engage in profitable ministry*. Filling believers' heads (or notebooks) with facts falls a long way short. The stated and authoritative (not authoritarian!) ministry is designed by Christ to produce believers who are able to edify each other, not to make them grow fat and, at the same time, increasingly dependent on the pulpit. Imagine, in a physical sense, always eating four square meals a day, and never

⁵ Note the apostle's words. Paul did not say Christ gave the church *some* pastors, and, in addition, gave the church *some* teachers, but that he gave the church some pastors-and-teachers; that is, men who are pastoral teachers, teachers who teach with a pastoral heart, pastor-teachers, the double designation describing two aspects of their work – as most commentators agree. This is why I use the hyphens.

doing any work, never doing anything productive with all the digested calories and proteins. The very suggestion is laughable. Or very sad! So it ought to be in a spiritual sense.

I repeat therefore: The stated ministry is designed by Christ to produce believers able to edify each other, not to produce a spoon-fed dependency. Note, once again, Romans 1:11-12; 15:14, just quoted. Paul the apostle wanted to visit Rome to be a blessing to the Romans, yes. *But they would also be a blessing to him*: ‘I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith... My brothers... you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another’. Why, even in the context of Romans 15:16, note the apostle’s emphasis on all-body ministry (Rom. 15:14-17; not forgetting Rom. 12:3-8).

Each believer is given grace for ‘mutual edification’ (Rom. 14:19), to be able to ‘edify another’ (NKJV), to be ‘competent to instruct one another’ (Rom. 15:14), to be ‘able... to admonish one another’ (NKJV), to ‘encourage each other’ (1 Thess. 4:18), to ‘comfort one another’ (NKJV), to ‘encourage one another and build each other up’ (1 Thess. 5:11), to ‘comfort each other, and edify one another’ (NKJV), to ‘warn... encourage... help’ (1 Thess. 5:14), to ‘warn... comfort... uphold’ (NKJV) fellow-believers.⁶ Indeed, as we have seen, Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, could add, ‘encourage one another and build each other up, *just as in fact you are doing*’ (1 Thess. 5:11). Could Paul say this to many churches today? I especially note the ‘just as in fact you are doing’. I am not talking about mere text-book theory; ‘just as in fact you are doing’. Not ‘just as you used to do’; not ‘just as you once did’; not ‘just as you would like to do’. But ‘just as in fact you *are* doing’. This is the New Testament church that Christ set up!

The New Testament gives no warrant whatsoever for the notion that ‘the pastor’⁷ edifies the members; end of story. Not at all! It speaks of the elders edifying the believers who in turn edify one another – including the elders! How rarely does ‘a pastor’ think

⁶ See also Rom. 15:2; 1 Cor. 14:3-5,26; 2 Cor. 1:4; Eph. 4:25-29.

⁷ Note the almost universal switch from the biblical ‘pastors-and-teachers’ to ‘the pastor’. This is the source of much trouble.

church members are there to edify him! And how few believers think they ought to edify their ‘pastor’! Such ideas, I suggest, sound preposterous to most believers, not excluding ‘pastors’, today. But ‘encourage [exhort, NKJV] one another daily’ (Heb. 3:13) is said to all believers; all believers, not just a special man in the church – ‘the pastor’.

1 Thessalonians 5:11-28 encapsulates what I want to say. Here we find an all-body ministry where all believers are expected to warn, to encourage, to show patience, to demonstrate love by action, to pray, to greet, and so on, and all need grace to carry out these functions. And at the same time, as an integral part of it, we have stated rulers.

That is how it should be. All believers need constant, consistent and continual teaching. And that teaching is designed (or ought to be designed) to prepare every believer to engage in ‘the ministry’. This ‘work of the ministry’ is something *all* the saints are to do. It is not something reserved for elders or deacons; certainly it is not confined to an ‘ordained’ minister. I am in the habit of reminding churches with, say, twenty members, that they have twenty ministers or preachers. Not in a formal sense, of course, but, nevertheless, a church with twenty members has twenty real ministers. It has twenty priests!

I do not wish to romanticise the New Testament churches. I acknowledge that they had their problems, and made their mistakes. Big problems, big mistakes. Nevertheless, it is a fact that I have been able to quote from the apostolic letters to the churches in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus and Colosse, as well as Thessalonica – not to mention those believers to whom Peter and Jude wrote. What is more, some of the problems which arose in the New Testament churches did so because of their excesses in the believers’ exercise of their mutual ministry. Yet it is noteworthy that no apostle tried to put a stop to such ministry. Take, for instance, the excessive spiritual behaviour of the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14). Paul did not reprove them for trying to engage in ministry. Nor did he tell them to be content to sit and listen. Certainly not! He just wanted better order, better edification in the exercise of their mutual ministry. He certainly did not want silence and inaction! By the way, reader, do you think the apostle would

have to administer the same rebuke to most churches today? Why not? The fact is, problems can arise when there is little or no mutual ministry! Excessive signs of life are not altogether good, but they are a great deal better than depressing evidence of death! A corpse may have none of the problems of a living man. But do we want our assemblies to be gatherings of cadavers?

And the ministry of each and every believer reaches outside the church. A believer preaches when he or she engages someone in a spiritual conversation, or witnesses to an unbeliever. When the early church was persecuted, the believers were driven out of Jerusalem. 'Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went... telling the message... telling them [not only Jews, but Greeks] the good news about the Lord Jesus' (Acts 8:4; 11:19-20); that is, they talked to people, they told them about Christ, they 'gossiped' the gospel. The believers in question certainly did not stand in non-existent pulpits in non-existent places of worship at stated pre-arranged times! In noting this fact, I am not, of course, condemning pre-arranged services – how did Acts 13:44 come about? Incidentally, neither am I saying that the usual form of a pulpit is necessary, nor even helpful. All I am doing is pointing out that the early church saw conversions, even when they were denied the structure (props?) we have come to regard as essential. In other words, we must not confine 'preaching' to a man standing in a pulpit. The word is far too rich for that!

What I am saying is this: according to the New Testament, every believer, each believer, is a priest, and, as a priest, each and every believer, in this sense, is a preacher. It is every believer's responsibility and privilege – both men and women – to so live before men that, if they are moved to ask the believer about his hope, then that believer is fully able to meet the apostolic command, and is 'always... prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (1 Pet. 3:15). Actions do speak louder than words, and this is certainly more than an old saw (1 Pet. 3:1-6). Nevertheless, it must not be made into an excuse for silence. To tell others about Christ and his gospel is a part of the believer's ministry. For biblical examples of

it, see Mark 5:18-20; John 1:29-36,41-42,44-46; 4:28-30,39-42; Acts 4:20; 8:4-5,26-40; 9:20.

All this comprises the priestly duty of preaching the gospel, and yet none of it, perhaps, comes under what we know today as the formal task of preaching in a pulpit. To be engaged in any way in the spread of the gospel is to be engaged in a work of the greatest dignity and importance. It is a 'priestly duty'. Preaching the gospel, both formally and informally, is, therefore, a most noble work. I would rather be a priestly preacher for Christ than be the king of Ruritania.

And when any are converted under such a ministry, God is pleased to receive such as an offering to him. He calls them 'first-fruits' (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15; Jas. 1:18; Rev. 14:4, all NKJV). This, of course, is a reference to the old covenant, in that the 'first-fruits' were offered to God in worship (Ex. 23:16,19; 34:26; Lev. 2:12; 23:10,17,20; Num. 18:12; 28:26; Deut. 18:4; 26:2,10; see also Prov. 3:9; Jer. 2:3; *etc.*). Consequently, when, in the new covenant, the Holy Spirit uses the priestly ministry of believers, both in prayer and preaching, when he makes the call of the gospel effective, when he saves sinners and sanctifies saints by it, God looks on this as a sacrificial, priestly duty and an offering pleasing to him. So much so, he regards all those who benefit from his people's labours as first-fruits to him.

So, whether within the church, or outside, all believers are priestly ministers, gifted by the Spirit for the work of 'the ministry'. Consider the apostle's words to the Corinthians:

Such confidence... is ours through Christ before God... Our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant... of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:4-6).

Of whom was Paul speaking when he wrote: 'He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant... of the Spirit'? I cannot accept that the use of 'ours', 'our' and 'us' speaks *only* of the apostles. If it does, then it would appear that Paul might have been implying that, while he and his fellows were competent, the Corinthians, and all believers since, were and are not. In the apostolic age, non-apostle believers, I suppose, just had to relax, sit back, not bothering their heads and bewildering themselves with

things far beyond them, and let the apostles – who alone were ‘competent’ – do it all for them.

I cannot agree. How it would tally with Acts 17:11 baffles me. And what the equivalent is for believers after the apostolic age, including us today, I dread to contemplate – if it was only the apostles who were ‘competent’. We would be bereft of a competent ministry today, and no believer would have any competence to edify another. This is so far out of step with the overwhelming impression the New Testament gives of believers exuberantly engaged in spiritual activity, edifying each other – or being encouraged to – that it cannot possibly be right. I have already mentioned 1 Corinthians 14.

Getting back to 2 Corinthians chapters 2 to 4, without question Paul *is* speaking of his own ministry, and that of his fellow-apostles and fellow-workers, yes. And, as I will explain, the specially endowed – the apostles – were, and their writings and works remain, absolutely essential and fundamental to the gospel, yes. Coming down the scale of authority, there is, there always has been, an essential role in the church of God for able teachers and preachers – and these are not ten a penny. Only God can make them ‘competent’.

All that is perfectly true, as I will delineate. But notice how the apostle uses ‘we’ in these three chapters. Sometimes by ‘we’ he does mean, perhaps, just himself, maybe with other apostles and fellow-workers in mind (2 Cor. 2:17; 3:1; 4:7-15), although it is not absolutely certain in all these cases. But notice how he quickly moves into ‘you’ (2 Cor. 3:1-3). So what should we make of the ‘we’ and ‘ours’ in the next verses, leading on to the words I quoted above? And it is, I think, unlikely that the ‘we’ in 2 Corinthians 3:12-18; 4:16-18; let alone 5:1 and on, should be limited to Paul himself, or to Paul and his fellow-apostles.

In any case, it is undeniable that *all* Christ’s people are kings, priests and prophets by reason of their union with Christ. The prophets foretold it, and Christ established it. Not in a literal sense, of course, but in a spiritual sense. Believers, therefore, are ministers. I think we may justly argue that they are ‘competent’; all of them are ‘competent as ministers’. In fact, Paul himself says it is so. As I quoted earlier, writing to the Romans, the apostle declared:

‘I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another’ (Rom. 15:14). And when Paul spoke of ‘brothers’, he was not thinking only of men!

Each believer has God’s Spirit and can, therefore, in a measure teach others. The point can be broadened. God equips all his people to fulfil that particular ministry which he has for each of them. To deny it is to fly in the face of the provisions of the new covenant (Isa. 54:13; 61:6; Jer. 31:31-34; 33:14-22; Ezek. 40:46; 44:10-31; Zeph. 3:9-10; Mal. 3:1-4; John 6:45; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 1 Thess. 4:9; Heb. 8:8-12; 10:15-18; 1 Pet. 2:4-12; 4:10-11; 1 John 2:20-21,27; 5:20; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Nevertheless, because, according to the New Testament, all believers are ‘preaching ministers’, it does not mean that it did not call for recognised and stated able preachers who were to edify the church by their teaching. The very suggestion shows a lack of understanding of what the New Testament means by the many different words it uses for ‘preach’ and ‘teach’. Obviously the promise that no member of the new covenant will need a human teacher (Heb. 8:11; 1 John 2:20-21,27) cannot possibly mean what it appears to be saying at first glance. The writer to the Hebrews, and John were both teaching as they were saying it! Nobody in their right mind could doubt that the New Testament recognised the need for teachers and preachers, ministers!

But my point here is that *all* believers are competent ministers, gifted by God; *each* believer is gifted to minister. And that includes the ability to strengthen, encourage, reprove and confirm fellow-believers. Moses’ wish (Num. 11:29) has been more than amply fulfilled.

I realise that I am touching a very sensitive point, saying something contrary to common practice in many churches. Perhaps it will disturb some. Some might go as far as to think – and accuse me of it – that I am subverting the preaching and teaching ministry. So let me try, yet again, to set any anxious heart at rest. *I am, myself, anxious – anxious **not** to give the impression that I am dismissing the need for stated, and recognised, gifted teachers.* I am not! In a few moments, I will prove it. Let me give one example now. A few pages back, I quoted Acts 8:4; 11:19-20,

showing how ‘ordinary’ (I detest the word in this context) believers ‘preached’ the gospel. By God’s grace, they were ‘competent’: ‘The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord’ (Acts 11:21). But go on to Acts 11:22-26. Barnabas recognised that these ‘established’ believers, along with the new converts, needed solid teaching. The ‘ordinary’ believers were ‘ministers’, yes, all of them, but none of them were gifted sufficiently to sustain an edifying ministry to the church – which the church was crying out for.⁸ Barnabas rose to the occasion. He brought Paul to Antioch, and the pair of them, both gifted teachers, ‘for a whole year... met with the church and taught great numbers of people’. And they were successful, for it wasn’t long before the Antioch church had three more capable ‘prophets and teachers’ listed alongside Barnabas and Paul (Saul), who was listed last! (Acts 13:1; see also Acts 15:35).

I think that all this speaks for itself, and should calm the fears of any who think I might not hold to a stated, gifted ministry. I certainly hope so. I could not be more emphatic on the need for an able, stated preaching and teaching ministry, and on the biblical warrant for it.

My point here, however, must not be lost. All believers have a ‘ministering’ gift and ability. All of them. And this is an aspect of their priestly ministry under the new covenant. *This* ministry needs emphasising – and exercising!

Take Christ’s assurance: ‘Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them’ (Matt. 18:20). How wrong it is to confine this glorious, sweeping promise to a token quote at the opening of a public meeting. Let us stop tugging our forelock at the text and moving on! Christ meant what he said. Wherever two or three believers – believers, not just ministers or elders or whatever – wherever and whenever two or three believers come together for any spiritual purpose – to pray, to talk, to sing, to read and study Scripture, to testify, to repeat experience, or whatever – the Lord is with them. What does this tell us about Christ himself – the one who can guarantee his presence wherever and whenever his people meet? Think of that! Think of the dignity Christ places

⁸ The church always is. It is today! I certainly hope churches are praying for, and on the lookout for, able teachers.

upon such informal gatherings. Then again, think of the confidence Christ has in his people. Think, too, of what gifts and abilities the Spirit must dispense to them. The context of Matthew 18 is clear, and the rest of the New Testament is replete with the working out of the principle. Take the young church of the Thessalonians. Take the apostle's second letter to them. Trace the outworking of the principle throughout that letter. Though it was a young church, all of them had a part in all of the church's spiritual life. Even the apostle felt the need of their prayers for him. It shows just what Christ meant when he promised: 'Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them'. This is the priesthood of all believers in action.

Action! That's the word! Let us rescue 'the priesthood of all believers' from our Statement of Faith, and put it to work! It must not be reduced to a slogan. So much comes from it and by it. Those who rule the church are, themselves, in the first instance, believers, and, as such, priests of Christ. Their fellow-priests, as part of their priestly function, recognise and acknowledge the gift Christ gives to these men, and submit to them – to be edified in order to further exercise their own ministry. But all the members, the rulers and the ruled, are priests of the Lord; all of them *equally* priests of the Lord. Nothing – *nothing* – can take away from *that*. Nothing should be allowed to take away from it. Christ died for it!

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