

Reclaiming the Point
Part 3
“The Priesthood of All Believers”

I

Typically when I am in a public place where my profession might matter like a hospital or a police department I tend to say that I am “clergy,” which is odd for a church like ours. Honestly, if I’m talking with strangers I do my very best not to give away what my profession is at all. I find it tends to shut down conversations. I see people going back over everything they’ve said trying to figure out if they’ve incriminated themselves in any way. Or, they just become quiet and immediately less interested in talking to me because they think I’m out to convert them or judge them. But, if I have to introduce myself to people who don’t go to our church I find it useful to describe myself as “clergy.”

There’s a plethora of names I can be called: minister, pastor, preacher, reverend, etc.—each with its own varying degree of dignity (depending on the audience). But if you ask me what I want to be called, I would just say: Brandon. Brandon is fine. And at least part of the reason I prefer not to have official titles is because that’s how I was taught. I was taught, in the church that I grew up in, this particular kind of church (the “Church of Christ”) that there was no real distinction between ministers and the rest of the church members. I wasn’t ordained by any standard definition of the term (which the IRS loves...), and there’s nothing I do that anybody else in this church couldn’t do—at least as far as permission is concerned. In our church “clergy” is a job title, not a spiritual status. And I think that’s how it should be.

But then that raises the question of what I’m even here for—and the fear is that if the anti-authoritarian threads continue to be pulled, not only will I be out of a job, but the genius of the notion of appointing special people for special spiritual or religious tasks—a notion practiced by Jesus (Mark 3:13-18) and the early church (Acts 6:1-7)—will be lost as well to the detriment of the church. The task, then, is to bring both of these worlds together somehow: to unite the truth of the equality of all Christians, the “priesthood of all believers” (1 Peter 2:5), with the truth of the value of some of us preparing in special ways to take leadership roles in this body. In keeping with the theme of these essays I want to look at some of the origins of our notion of “the priesthood of all believers” in our own church’s history.

II

There were at least three major principles that informed what folks like Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell meant when they called for the equality of all Christians and the breakdown of the clerical system. 1) The insistence on the basic intelligence of all people; 2) the simplicity of the Bible; and 3) a general annoyance when scholars and professors disagreed on the first two points.

The first point, ironically, is self-evident. Stone and Campbell and many folks in this time period tended to think that every person held a set of basic reasoning capacities that would allow them to come to an understanding of faith and biblical principles.

Perhaps some folks needed remedial work in this area, but they were at least capable of it. Other than this being an opinion becoming popular among many at this time, the driving force behind the insistence that everyone had this basic intelligence was a view of salvation that required it. Simply put, the restorationists insisted that salvation require an understanding of the Bible, a self-conscious realization of what it was about and the doctrines it taught. And if everyone didn't at least have the potential to understand the Bible, then salvation wasn't actually for all. So Stone and Campbell and others like them insisted that everyone did have a basic intelligence whereby they could read and understand the gospel just as well as the most educated scholar.

The second point is the other side of the coin of the first point. Not only were people able to understand the Bible so that they could come to salvation—the Bible itself was simple and transparent enough for people of regular intelligence to grasp it. On the one hand we should say: well of course it is! It would be almost offensive to say that only the folks with the IQ and the educational background and other lofty credentials were capable of reading and interpreting this holy book—a book that was composed by mostly uneducated men. But on the other hand everyone likely has personal experience of either a) having learned something about the Bible from someone with an academic background that they would probably not have gleaned on their own; or b) having heard the most bizarre if not plain mislead interpretation of a passage. The old adage “The more you know the more you realize you don't know” has a flip side: “the less you know the less you realize you don't know.” The Bible has sometimes been described as a book that is shallow enough for a toddler and deep enough to drown an elephant. It is both, but the emphasis for Stone and Campbell was on the former often at the expense of forgetting the latter.

The third point is really the result of the first two. Stone and Campbell reacted against religious hierarchical authorities that decided who was and who was not allowed to read and interpret the Bible, usually depending on whether or not someone's doctrinal views were in line with the people in charge. Littered throughout their publications are quotes that show their frustration against the control that these high-minded folks attempted to exert and the corrupted views of Christianity that resulted. Barton Stone writes,

“I will now show you the true reason why we are thus invidiously called by the orthodox, nor can they conscientiously deny. Because by the light of the bible, we are exposing the foundations of sectarian kingdoms as founded on the sand—we are detecting the errors of their faith and practice, as very far from the ancient order of things—we have caused the people to inquire for themselves...”

Here the “orthodox” are those educated professors and ecclesiastical administrators who control who within their circles are allowed and capable of reading the Bible properly. The point Stone makes is that a plain reading of the text exposes the spurious nature of their intricate doctrinal systems that are precariously constructed upon logical syllogisms foreign to the Biblical grammar. These systems are “founded on the sand” and will crumble under the simple scrutiny of plain bible reading.

So when Stone and Campbell emphasized the equality and “priesthood” of all believers, they did so because they thought that everyone *could* understand the Bible,

because the Bible *was* understandable, and that all these educated folks with Ph.D.'s and fancy clerical titles were not only elitist in their assumption that ordinary folk *couldn't* read their Bibles, but their theological education resulted in a pretty odd read of the Bible themselves. These are things that I think, as far as they go, are true and right and worth internalizing. Everyone can understand their Bibles—although perhaps not in the individualistic way that Stone and Campbell seemed to think. The Bible is understandable—though not without diligent study. And it is possible for those of us formally educated to sometimes lose sight of the forest for the trees—though the same could be said for those who treat the Bible so flippantly as to assume that they can gain an authoritative understanding of it on their own without serious study (not just of the Bible itself, but of contexts and history and language and reasoning). All of these qualifications are the groundwork for bringing the notion of the priesthood of all believers together with the value of a theological vocation.

III

The main thing I think that needs to be said about the value of the “priesthood of all believers” is that this goes both ways. Historically it has, for historically justified reasons, been a way to reign in upstart clergy who get a diploma and think they've received the keys of the kingdom. Okay, so...no. Ministers shouldn't do that. Moreover, they shouldn't want to do that—it shouldn't be a thing they outwardly disavow but inwardly hold to be true. A minister might have the advantage of time and opportunity and formal education, but there is nothing spiritually superior about those features of a minister's life to the working single-mother who prays fervently on her knees day and night with simple words and a sincere heart.

Yet at the same time to declare that every church member is a “priest” is not just to say that they have immediate access to God through Jesus Christ. It is to place the responsibilities of the spiritual life on everybody and not just a chosen few. The phrase goes both ways. The bar is now raised.

The promise of such a wonderful idea as “the priesthood of all believers” is that it envisions a church packed to the brim with people joined in the common goal of knowing more, serving more, praying more, leading one another and being transformed as a community into something that truly resembles the body of Christ. That is the meaning of the equality of believers in the church today.