

EDITORIAL: Priesthood of the believer defines Baptists' differences_112403

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If you could study Baptists' DNA under a theological microscope, the defining chromosome—the strand that gives shape to all others—would be labeled “priesthood of the believer.”

Of course, numerous Baptist characteristics have received more attention, especially in recent decades. During the 1980s, at the height of the Southern Baptist Convention controversy, disagreement over Baptists' understanding of the nature of Scripture grabbed countless headlines. In the '90s, after one group gained control of the convention, Baptists focused on relationships, particularly between the fundamentalist-run SBC and the emerging moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. In the last few years, Baptists have debated how to conduct foreign and domestic missions. Baptists also have argued long and hard about structure, particularly the links—financial and relational—between churches and conventions, as well as between state and national conventions. If you've paid close attention, you probably could suggest a dozen other defining characteristics.

But Baptists' perspectives on the priesthood of the believer—the doctrine

they have contributed to the larger church-pervade all these issues. In general, an interpretation of the priesthood of the believer determines how a person or group understands humanity's place in the world. And that determination divides Baptists.

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Before we go on, some background: The theological foundation for the priesthood of the believer is a doctrine called soul competency. It suggests each person is born with a soul, the core of one's spiritual being, that makes the person competent to relate directly to a loving and righteous God. The creation accounts of Genesis, cycle of rebellion-reconciliation-rebellion of the Old Testament and grace-filled glory of the New Testament all affirm people were made for a loving relationship with God. They were provided with competence, or free will, to accept or reject God's love. Otherwise, their love for God would be coerced and therefore bogus.

Consequently, we say that all people are entitled to be "priests" before God. No one needs a human intermediary-another priest-to facilitate a personal relationship with God. Each person is capable of giving and receiving God's love, seeking God's counsel, approaching God with needs and repenting directly to God.

This is a great privilege. Unfortunately, many Baptists-from the right as

well as the left-understand the priesthood of the believer this far. That causes them to grasp only half the doctrine, which leads to misunderstanding and division.

The easy, enticing half of the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer is privilege. Who wouldn't feel proud, honored and grateful to relate directly to the King of the universe? The other half of the doctrine, however, is responsibility. Each person is responsible—to God and to others—for how this mighty privilege is used.

This concept is easier to understand when you think about the role of a priest within a congregation. He obviously enjoys privileges, such as presiding in worship and receiving recognition for his position. But he also bears enormous responsibility—both to God and to the people—for his stewardship of privilege and service to others.

The same goes for Baptists who believe in and practice the priesthood of the believer. We are privileged to go before God, to relate to God. We ask and receive God's guidance as we interpret Scripture, determine divine will for our lives and seek forgiveness of our sins. But we also exist in a community of believers, and we're responsible to serve them and are accountable to them. That's why Baptist historian Bill Leonard has suggested we re-name this doctrine “priesthood of all believers.” We are not Lone Ranger Christians, riding off alone with God. We're responsible to God, but we're accountable to each other.

Earlier, I mentioned Baptists' perspectives on the priesthood of the believer provide the defining chromosome in our DNA. That's because we see human tendency—and thus individual inclination to come down on the privilege or responsibility side of the doctrinal equation—differently.

This in large measure has to do with how much we emphasize another doctrine, total depravity. Articulated by Reformer John Calvin, the doctrine

of total depravity insists that, since Adam and Eve, all people are sinners. Everyone yields to the urge to place self above God. "There is no one righteous, no, not one," the Apostle Paul wrote.

Baptists believe this. We'd be hard pressed to name a Baptist who does not believe in total depravity, in humanity's sinful nature. However, the emphasis that different kinds of Baptists place on this determines how they come down on the priesthood of the believer and how they behave toward others.

Fundamentalists are more inclined to emphasize just how comprehensive and awful total depravity really is. Therefore, they naturally assume people will take advantage of the priesthood of the believer—abuse the generosity of privilege and ignore the accountability of responsibility. That's why they tend to go ballistic when others claim Jesus is all they need to guide them to do right; they're pretty sure a sinful person will take advantage of Jesus' goodwill. So, they insist on making people sign creeds and affirm new statements of belief. They're trying to build a theological wall to protect sinful souls from the evils of a wicked world.

Non-fundamentalists see it differently. While they recognize total depravity, they also stress that people are created in God's image. They're more inclined to believe people will do right and will land on the responsibility side of the priesthood of the believer. They emphasize that "me and Jesus" are sufficient to make all decisions, but they reason that a loving relationship with Jesus will compel a Christian to seek goodness and responsibility, not license and theological hedonism. For their part, they tend to be a little naive about human nature and sometimes even too quick to discount the value of Christian community.

Both extremes miss the nuance—and the beauty—of the priesthood of all believers. Some of us need to remember the church is a community of faith. We're accountable to each other, and all believers should be exhorted

toward responsibility as well as privilege. Fundamentalists need to recognize Christians reflect Christ's image and are motivated by freedom to love (which was why we were created in the first place). Confessions of faith may be theologically accurate and precisely articulate the beliefs of Baptists. But if they are coerced, they become creeds that imprison souls and deny spiritual freedom.

-Marv Knox

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