

## **The Priesthood of All Believers**

Good morning to you this Laity Sunday! As some of you may recall, I'm in the Methodist ministry candidacy program. Part of that process is that I've been doing some journaling and attempting to answer questions like, "Do you believe God has specially called you to the ministry?" Surprisingly, my answer to that question is "no." I don't believe God has *specially* called me to the ministry; I believe he has called *all* of us to the ministry. I want to become a Methodist minister so I'll have access to the pulpit and be able to share my ideas, and ironically one of my favorite ideas is the concept of the Priesthood of All Believers.

The Priesthood of All Believers is arguably the single most important foundational concept of Protestantism. Luther argued against medieval Catholics that Christians do not need priestly intercessors but may talk directly to God. Luther found scriptural support for the Priesthood of All Believers in verses like 1 Peter 2:9, "You are a royal priesthood and a priestly kingdom," and Revelation 5:10, "Through your blood you have made us into priests and kings." However the idea that all Christians should think of ourselves as priests goes all the way back to the early Church.

I want to make just a couple of points this morning about the importance of the Priesthood of All Believers and then we can break early for lunch.

First, if all Christians took seriously the idea that we are all priests, then like the early Church, it would be easier for us to follow Jesus's teachings on nonviolence. In the second century, a pagan philosopher named Celsus charged that Christians posed a threat to the Roman Empire because we wouldn't fight in the military. The early Church father Origen of Alexander replied:

And to those enemies of our faith who demand us to bear arms for the commonwealth and to slay men, we reply: Do not those who are the priests at certain shrines . . . keep their hands free from blood, so that they may offer the appointed sacrifices to your gods? Even when war is upon you, you never enlist the priests in the army. If, then, that is a praiseworthy custom, how much more so that when others are engaged in battle Christians engage as the priests and ministers of God, keeping their hands pure. . . . Accordingly, in this way, we are much more helpful to the kings than those who go into the field to fight for them. (*Against Celsus* VII, LXIII)

Note the whole reason this debate came up is because second-century Christians weren't fighting in the military, true to Jesus's teachings of "love your enemies" and "turn the other cheek." Scholars generally agree there's little record of Christians fighting in the military prior to the year 313 CE, when the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Holy Roman Empire. Note also that the pagan Roman priests weren't fighting in the military, either. Interestingly, we still follow this custom today. Travis Fulton, my hometown pastor who recognized and validated my call to the ministry, served over twenty years in the National Guard and was deployed to the first Gulf War. But did he ever fire a shot in anger? Nope. In fact Travis never once picked up a weapon. According to the Geneva Convention, *clergy are specifically prohibited from bearing arms*. Travis told me this, and he was right: I looked it up. Thus, if we returned to the position of the early Church, that all Christians are priests, then according to the Geneva Convention it would be illegal for Christians to fight in the

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military. One of the main ways that Jesus's teachings on nonviolence were corrupted was the hierarchical structure imposed upon the Church by Constantine: the priests still followed the full and true yoke of Christ, but the rank and file laity did not. Incidentally, none of the authors of the so-called "just war" doctrine—not Ambrose, not Augustine, nor Thomas Aquinas—ever once fought in the military. Notably, Francis of Assisi did fight in the Crusades, but upon his return he had a tumultuous conversion experience that convinced him to live and teach nonviolence the rest of his life.

Another doctrine taught by Origen, and the second point I want to discuss this morning, was *apokastasis*, the belief that all beings will be reconciled to God, including Satan and his fallen angels. Nowadays we call this belief "universalism." Some think John Wesley taught universalism, but I believe this is a fundamental misunderstanding: what Wesley really taught was the *possibility* of universal salvation.

Let me share a story with you to illustrate the difference. Back in the early 90s, I attended a home Bible study class started by the Brookhaven First United Methodist Church. A hard-core Calvinist attended the study named Ross Plottner, and as you might imagine Ross and I got into it all the time, thus proving the old adage, "Wherever two or more are gathered in Jesus's name there's sure to be a theological argument"! One night Ross and I were debating the question of universal salvation, and we were firing "Bible bullets" at each other, which is to day, we were citing biblical proof-texts to support our positions.

"Do you believe God will give us whatever we pray in Jesus's name?" I asked, citing John 15:16 and 16:23.

"Yes," Ross conceded.

“Well then, I pray every single day for universal salvation in Jesus’s name, and I believe my prayer will be answered. What do you say to that?”

Ross answered, “Then you’re not praying within God’s will.”

“I’m not? Hasn’t God’s will been revealed in 2 Peter 3:9 that says, ‘The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness but is forbearing toward you, *not wishing that any should perish but that all such reach repentance.*’”

And that was the end of the argument.

Two months ago I used the same argument on an old friend named Mike Biggs who’s now a Presbyterian pastor, and he said, “You have to read that verse from 2 Peter in context. The author didn’t mean all of humanity when he said ‘all should reach repentance’; the letter was only addressed to that particular church. Some souls are predestined for hell and that’s the way God wants it.” My, oh, my! Rationalizations like this are surely why John Wesley remarked to his close friend Whitefield, a Calvinist: “Your god is my devil.” Days later I studied 2 Peter and found no evidence whatsoever that it was written only for a particular church. But I doubt it would’ve mattered to my friend if I’d resurrected the author of 2 Peter and had him go through the original Greek manuscript, line by line. Take it from a second-generation trial lawyer: you can argue ‘til you’re blue in the face, but if someone’s got their mind dead set against something it’s really hard to win.

Here’s the thing: maybe the Calvinists are right and God has predestined some souls for hell, no matter what. But what if they’re wrong? What if God’s not the only factor in the equation? Did anyone see the second *Matrix* movie? The hero Neo said to the bad guy known as the Architect, “The problem is choice.”

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Choice. We can choose to share the gospel with our brothers and sisters or not. Practically speaking, it doesn't really matter who's "right." If we don't share the gospel then Calvinist predestination becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. I believe universal salvation is possible, but if and only if each and every one of us do our part. My daily prayer for universal salvation must become *your* daily prayer, must become *all* our prayer. That's the only way universal salvation will ever become real, become more than a possibility.

That's why it's essential that all Christians think of ourselves as priests, and especially us Methodists. I recently learned that Abraham Lincoln once noted the Methodists were, at that time, the largest and most influential Protestant denomination in America. No longer. The Baptists have long since passed us up. Look around at our congregation this morning: our members are older than they used to be. We are very much in danger of losing our dear old church within a single generation. *We Methodists must evangelize or die!* So I say to you this morning: go forth, be priests!

May the Peace of the Lord that passes all understanding be with you all.