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The Priesthood of All Believers:
A Doctrine with an Evil Twin

a sermon on 1 Peter 2.4-10
for Reformation Sunday
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“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” The priesthood of all believers is a biblical truth that was dusted off and rehabilitated by Martin Luther during the Protestant Reformation. I say a biblical truth, not just a New Testament truth, because the Old Testament teaches it too. When Israel was still at Mt. Sinai, even before he gave them the Ten Commandments, God told Moses to tell the people: “The whole earth is mine, *but* you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” [Ex 19.6]. Our 1 Peter text echoes God’s words and applies them to the church.

The priesthood of all believers is a doctrine that has an evil twin. I’ll bet you didn’t know that. That’s the value of a seminary education; you learn these things. Not all doctrines have an evil twin, but more of them do than you might think. An evil twin, doctrinally speaking, is when a truth gets twisted, misunderstood, or misrepresented; *and*, people believe the lie because they confuse it with the truth. That is, they think they are believing the right thing, even though they are believing the wrong thing.

Every Christian truth has an opposite falsehood. For example, God raised Jesus from the dead. That’s true. The opposite falsehood would be that God did not raise Jesus from the dead. Notice how different these two claims are. No one is going to mix the two up. You may believe God raised Jesus from the dead. You may not. You may not be able to make up your mind. The one thing you won’t do, though, is think you believe in the resurrection when you don’t. In this case, falsehood looks nothing like truth. You won’t confuse them.

Some doctrines are different. Some have an evil twin. The evil twin is a falsehood that looks so much like the truth, people easily confuse them. What I want to do today is introduce you to both the priesthood of all believers and to its evil twin, a doctrine I call “the churchhood of all believers.” I want to unmask this imposter, so that you recognize him when you see him, so you will not be fooled. He’s a crafty villain who can damage your soul and rob you of much joy.

The priesthood of all believers means, first and foremost, that we neither have nor need any mediator between God and us except the one Mediator, Jesus Christ. You have a

direct relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and he is all you need. No other person – living or dead – no institution stands between you and God.

You can see what an important truth this is. God is immediate to each of us. All that separates us from him is overcome by Jesus. Jesus is the Mediator. We need no other. In Luther's day, the church had forgotten this. A lot of practices and traditions had grown up that made people believe the church and its official priesthood functioned as a mediator. Jesus gets you to God, but the church gets you to Jesus. People thought the church controlled grace, and this gave the church of that day a power it badly abused. Luther was horrified by this. He reacted against it. He preached the priesthood of all believers as an antidote to it.

Luther was right, but we have to be very careful because right here is where the churchhood of all believers comes from. The churchhood of all believers states that because the church is not a mediator, and because it does not control grace or my access to God, and because I can relate directly to God through Jesus Christ, then I don't need the church. I can be a church unto myself. Hence the name "churchhood of all believers." It is a false doctrine that says, "I don't need the church because I can function as a church of one. All I need is Jesus. Church is nice for those who like it, but it is not necessary."

The churchhood of all believers is among the most popular doctrines today. In his book *Pastor*, United Methodist bishop Will Willimon cites a survey taken in 1994. That's been a few years now, but I doubt the figures have improved. The survey explored the religious practices of baby boomers, 92% of which identified themselves as religious. Only 62% claimed to be church members. Only 47% worshipped at least twice a month. They considered church membership an optional part of the Christian faith. What was really surprising was that even those who belonged to a church and worshipped frequently considered church participation optional! Eighty percent of Presbyterians surveyed agreed that church is merely an option for Christians who like it! ... Wow, I hope none of you took a survey back in 1994 ... Anyway, among other mainline Christians, 72% agreed. Even among what Willimon calls fundamentalists, 45% agreed that church is optional. Willimon concludes, "Even those who attend church see their church activity as thoroughly tangential to their faith" [p. 218]. Just this morning, I heard on the radio a Christian scholar from Australia who gave similar figures for that country today. A high percentage of Australians consider themselves "religious" or "spiritual." A fair number identify themselves as Christian. Only 4% go to church.

Where did we get the idea that church is optional? We didn't get it from the New Testament! We shouldn't think it follows from the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Look at our scripture reading, the classic text for defending the priesthood of all believers. What is it about? It's about the church. It calls Christians "living stones." What's the point of that image? I'll give you a clue. Think of a brick. By itself it is not

much good, unless you want to break a window. If you want to build a house or a church, you need lots of bricks, lots of stones. That's what Christians are. We are like living stones, built by God into a temple where his Spirit dwells. Peter started with the image of Jesus as the chief cornerstone. He learned this straight from Jesus himself. The stone the builders rejected became the chief cornerstone. The other stones in this holy temple are believers. God didn't call you to be a lonely, useless brick. He doesn't toss believers together as a big, random pile of bricks. He builds us together in love as a temple. ... The passage also calls us a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God's own people.

Church, you see, isn't something you do. It is who you are. We are the church. If you believe in Jesus, you are part of the church. If you do not worship with other believers, if you do not work with them in ministry, if you do not support them as they try to follow Jesus, then you have not made a choice about something that was optional in the first place. You have been unfaithful to Christ and the call God has given you.

Luther was right. The answer to the abuses of the church in his day was not to do away with church. It was to reform it. To make the church what it is supposed to be. The church is not a mediator between God and believers. The church is believers. The priesthood of all believers means that we offer praise to God and prayers for others. That's our priestly function. Our duty. We don't do those by ourselves. We do them together.

Likewise, the church has been given a mission, and it requires all of us to work together. You can't be a church to yourself, because you don't have enough spiritual gifts. Together we do. The Holy Spirit gives us gifts and calls us together to use them in concert with one another. The church of David Mauldin or the church of you would be terrible churches. The church of Jesus Christ needs David Mauldin, and it needs you, and together God makes us special.

The priesthood of all believers means you need no mediator except Jesus Christ. The churchhood of all believers twists this to say that if the church is not a mediator, then you don't need the church. On the contrary, church is mandatory for all believers because God calls us to be his people. Church was never meant to be a mediator; it was meant to be us.

That's the first main point. The second is this: The priesthood of all believers means you can read the Bible for yourself. In fact, you can judge the preaching and teaching of your pastor. In fact, you have a duty to do so. Luther put this truth into practice explosively when he printed pamphlets in German. And he translated the Bible into German, and made it available to everyday people. He even preached in German and made German the language of worship. Until then, worship had been in Latin, even though most people didn't understand it. Only the educated elites did. The nobility

and clergy. Suddenly scripture was in the hands of common people! This terrified church authorities. They preferred to tell people what scripture said. They claimed authority to give *the* right interpretation, which not surprisingly tended to protect their rights and privileges. Luther defended his controversial actions by appealing to the priesthood of all believers. Scripture rightly belongs to all believers.

Luther was right, but again you have to be very careful, because this is where the churchhood of all believers makes his most crafty attacks. The priesthood of all believers says you can read the Bible and you ought to take care that your pastor preaches scripture faithfully. The churchhood of all believers makes people think that when they read the Bible, they can make it say whatever they want. They can pick and choose what they want to believe. It makes them think, “My interpretation is as good as anyone else’s.” At its worst, it makes them say things like, “Learning Greek and Hebrew is a waste of time. Learning about the historical background of the Bible is a waste of time. Learning what scholars and theologians through the ages have thought is a waste of time. All I have to do is read the Bible and decide for myself what it means.” This attitude, my friends, is where snake handling comes from.

I’m serious. Even within Luther’s lifetime, this problem arose. He put the Bible in the hands of the people, and before long some of them are interpreting it in all sorts of odd ways, and Luther was aghast. Christians ought to read the Bible, but they ought not make ignorance a virtue when they try to understand it. Luther and Calvin are good examples. They read Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. They challenged official church interpretations of scripture, but they always went back to the church fathers, like Augustine, to show how their interpretation was not out of the blue. It was in fact, more faithful than the pope’s. They cared deeply about what the text says and what it means, and they never felt that we are free to invent novel interpretations or to impose our agenda onto the text. People today want to do this. One of my seminary professors wrote on a paper I had submitted, “Does the text have meaning apart from a community that interprets it?” Of course it does. But he didn’t think so. He believed the church is free to make scripture say whatever we want. And many, many Christians believe the same thing on an individual level. They feel free to pick and choose what to believe. “I like grace, I’ll go with that. Judgment not so much. Certainly not hell.” Or, “I like that Jesus saves us, but I don’t like people having to believe in him, that seems a bit much.” Or, “I don’t like Paul, so I don’t read Paul.” Or, “I don’t like the Old Testament, so I ignore it.”

We are not free to do this. Your interpretation is not as good as anyone else’s. Actually it may be, but you don’t know that until you know how faithful Christians have interpreted the Bible through the ages. I am not saying you have to read the Bible in the original Greek and Hebrew. I am not saying you need a seminary degree. I am saying you need to care what the text actually means, and you need to be in some kind of conversation with what the church believes – this can be through a commentary you

can understand or through a Sunday school class or through my sermons, which hopefully you can understand and learn from.

The priesthood of all believers means the Bible belongs to you. It is God's Word to you. But this lays on you the obligation to read it and understand it to the best of your ability. It also means you judge your pastor's sermons, not on the basis of "do I like this," or "do I agree with this," or "does this fit the intellectual fads of our time," but rather on the basis of "is the sermon faithful to scripture and does it square with the historic teaching of the church?"

Just as the churchhood of all believers tells people they don't need the church in order to belong to God, it tells people they don't need anyone else to help them know what to believe. It rejects all authority, and that's why it is so popular. Our culture exalts the individual and rejects all authority. Luther rightly rejected a church hierarchy that claimed absolute authority to decide what scripture means. But that does not mean scripture has no meaning or that you can't learn from others what it means. Scripture is authoritative for Christians, and we are not free to reject its authority.

That's the second point. The third point is this: The priesthood of all believers is about Christian freedom. The churchhood of all believers is about Christian autonomy. Do you see the difference? I'll bet most people don't. Because we live in a culture that defines freedom as autonomy. Freedom means I can do anything I want. Right? Christianity disagrees.

Christian freedom is the freedom to approach God without fear. The priesthood of all believers means you are free to love. You are a child of God and a priest, so you are free from insecurity and nagging self-doubt. Isn't that liberating? You don't have to constantly strive to be worthy? You don't need the best clothes, the latest gadgets, or whatever. You don't have to prove you are better than anyone else. You don't have to earn love. You are loved and you are free to love, and you can bring the needs of a hurting world to your Father in heaven. That's Christian freedom, the confidence to say, "This is my Father's world," and the humility to love it the way he does.

Christian freedom means you are free to become, in Christ, the person God created you to be. Your true self. And for this reason, it cannot mean autonomy, because you were never meant to be God. You were made for relationship with him, but you relate to God in dependence and submission. So you cannot always have what you want. And you cannot always do what you want. And you will have to make sacrifices, because true freedom means "not my will but yours be done." We live in a culture that thinks this is crazy. Most people think freedom means I can do or get or be whatever I want. Our culture thinks like an addict. An addict wants the next high. To an addict, freedom means getting it. But true freedom, as even addicts know in more lucid moments, is freedom from addiction. Jesus wants to set you free from slavery to selfish

desires and the incessant demands of a scared, insecure soul. Money, sex, and power are the drugs of choice in our addict culture. Jesus is not against these. They are all gifts God gives us to be used and enjoyed according to the design of their maker. And yet in the hands of broken people – and all people are broken – they easily enslave us. The tragedy is, all the while people are slaves, our culture keeps telling them they are free. It's a warped idea of freedom. That's why most people find Christianity's idea of freedom so odd. But Jesus makes us truly free, as no one else can.

The priesthood of all believers celebrates our freedom. The churchhood of all believers swaps autonomy for freedom and says you can call your own shots.

Finally, the priesthood of all believers means that all of life is holy, and every believer can honor God in everyday life. In Luther's day, most people didn't try to be holy. They had monks and nuns who did that for them. People with religious jobs were supposed to be holy. Butchers and bakers and homemakers, not so much. The Reformation changed this. All believers are called to holiness. All believers can honor God in their work. The pastor's work is an offering to God, but so is the teacher's and the pharmacist's and the sales associate's and even the politician's. Everyday, in everything you do, you serve and honor God. All of life is – or at least should be – holy. It is holy when we live for Christ and in loving obedience give our lives to him.

The churchhood of all believers also says all of life is holy, but it leaves out the part about loving obedience. In this false view, holiness just happens without you doing anything. No need to care for your neighbor. Don't trouble yourself with corporate worship. Just think positively and be "spiritual," whatever that means. At least in Luther's day *some* people were trying had to be holy. If the churchhood of all believers gets his way, nobody will be. We'll all just revel in the illusion of holiness without commitment and sacrifice and a love for God greater than love for self.

That last idea provides a good way to end the sermon and a good way for you to choose between the priesthood of all believers and the churchhood of all believers. The biggest difference between the two is this: If the priesthood of all believers is true, then the only way you can be happy is if you love God more than you love yourself. The greater your love for God, the most joy you will experience. In contrast, the churchhood of all believers lets you love yourself more. It puts you in the driver's seat. It never asks you to say, "Not my will but yours be done." It gives you lots of options to believe and do what you want. It is false, but very appealing, especially for people like us raised as rugged individuals and consumers. To be a priest is both a joyful privilege and also a burden. But that's what God wants you to be. Christ died for you, and if you have been united with him by baptism and faith, you belong to God's people. You are part of that chosen race, that holy nation, that kingdom of priests. Amen.