

**Here We Stand: The Priesthood of the Believer**  
**1 Tim. 2:5; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Heb. 4:14-5:10, 10:19-25**

**Intro:**

We now come to the close of our Here We Stand series. The recovery of the gospel in the Reformation had theological ripple effects throughout the world. One of the most significant doctrines recovered was the priesthood of the believer. As Christians began to understand that they did not need a human priest or dead saint to intercede for them they began to boldly go before the throne of grace.

Let me tell you another story from the Protestant Reformation. You see it was not all about big personalities, great preachers and radical books published. The bulk of the Reformation was about every day, ordinary followers of Christ. Most of them are forgotten and most we will never know their names but they paid the price for their faith in Christ with their lives.

One of those was an ordinary wife and mother named Helen Stirk. Ironically she paid with her life for her understanding of the priesthood of the believer. She was a fairly average Scottish Christian in the city of Perth, Scotland. She was dedicated to daily domestic work as a wife and mother and her life remained unnoticed to history until the birth of her last child in 1544.

When the time arrived for Helen's labor and delivery, Catholic tradition called for earnest prayers to the Virgin Mary. Helen understood the Scripture and rejected this tradition. The baffled midwives pressed her to make such a prayer, but she refused the ritual.

Hellen confidently told the midwives, *"If I had lived in the days of the Virgin, God might have looked likewise to my humility and base estate, as he did the Virgin's, and might have made me the mother of Christ."* Hellen's confession must have triggered gasps but she was settled and comforted by her theology. She knew her prayers were going directly to God through her Savior Jesus Christ.

The news of Helen's refusal to pray to Mary and her confession soon found its way to the Catholic clergy and quickly up the chain to the presiding cardinal. His response was swift and severe to squelch the Protestant theology of the priesthood of the believer. Helen and her husband, James, were arrested and imprisoned, along with four other outspoken Protestants in the city. The small group was soon found guilty of "heresy" and sentenced to death. The following day, soldiers brought Helen, her husband, and the condemned Protestants to the gallows.

**Writer Tony Reinke recounts her story:** *"Helen asked to die side by side with her husband, James Finlason, but her request was denied. Men were to be hanged, women drowned, and James would go first. Holding her young child in her arms, Helen approached her husband, kissed him, and gave him these parting words: 'Husband, be glad, for we have lived together many joyful days, and this day, in which we must die, we ought to esteem the most joyful of all, because we shall have joy forever. Therefore I will not bid you good night, for we shall shortly meet in the kingdom of heaven.' James was hanged before her eyes. All eyes then fell to Helen, who was forced to hand her newborn to a nurse entrusted with the child's care from this point. The authorities led Helen to a nearby pond, bound her hands and feet, put her into a large gunnysack along with stones or weights, and threw her into the water. All for the crime of 'blaspheming the Virgin Mary.'"*<sup>1</sup>

Helen Stirk understood that she did not need to pray to a dead saint for help when she could take her request directly to God through Christ. She understood there is one mediator between God and man, the Man, Jesus Christ. As the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer that was recovered in the Reformation, it did away with the idea that we need a vocational priest

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Reinke, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-ordinary-virgin-mary - mary-s-equal>

sanctioned by the church to intercede for us and that it is pointless to seek to have dead saints to seek Jesus on our behalf BUT the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer is SO much more than just not needing a priest to pray for us.

The doctrine of the priesthood of every believer can be understood in two broad categories. First it exalts the glory of our Savior who is our Great High Priest who never grows weary of representing us before God and also who genuinely loves to represent us before God. Secondly it teaches us what Scripture says about our roles and responsibilities to one another in a local church.

**Main Point: The very nature of the gospel that creates a priesthood of believers gives us the responsibility to exercise care and watchfulness in our life together as a local church.**

**I. Jesus is our Great High Priest who calls us into the priesthood with Him.**

**II. So you are in the priesthood—now what?**

**I. Jesus is our Great High Priest who calls us into priesthood with Him (Hebrews 4:14-5:10)**

The doctrine of the priesthood of believers is rooted in the person and work of Christ's priesthood. **So we need to look at Christ's priesthood before we look at ours. Hebrews 4:14-5:10 helps us see what kind of Great High Priest we need?**

**1. We need a Great High Priest to represent us before God because he is both God and man. (Hebrews 5:1-6)**

- You may be here and not even believe you need God much less to have someone represent you before God. What is the big deal? Why do I need someone to do that? It is because we cannot represent ourselves before a Holy God. We are sinners and guilty of sin and therefore cannot stand before a holy God so we need someone to stand in our place—Jesus is that Mediator.
- We need a mediator but not just any mediator. We needed a mediator who understands our dilemma, our weaknesses, and our flaws but yet without these weaknesses and sins. We needed a mediator who understands God's side of the issue. We need someone who understands both God and us. Jesus is the mediator we know as our Great High Priest. He is the God-Man, fully God and fully man (yet without sin). This is who we have in Christ.
- **Look at Hebrews 5:1-6. This text explains the requirements of the priesthood that are grounded in Levitical priesthood, which is explained in Leviticus 16 and then shows the superiority of Jesus' priesthood.**
  - **Verse 1: Where does the High Priest come from?** The high priest comes from among people.
  - **Verses 1: What does he do?** He offers gifts and sacrifices on behalf of the people so He can represent people in matters related to God. We say that he mediates between God and man. He is the "go-between."
  - **Verses 2-3:** Because the high priest comes from among people and is weak, he is able to deal **gently** with the people for whom he is responsible when he offers sacrifices for them and for himself.
    - **Verse 2** "He can deal **gently** with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is **beset** with weakness."

There are a couple of powerful images in the words in v. 2:

- **Gently:** means to take a measuring cup out and measure.
- **Beset: The Greek word for beset is a vivid word picture.** It means to be surrounded by something. It is used in the gospels of Mark and Luke to describe that when a person causes a little one to sin. Jesus said the person who does this ought to be cast into a lake with a large millstone tied around his neck.

**It means to be immersed and sunk in whatever situation.** The high priest knows what weakness and sin is like because he is immersed in weakness and suffering and because he is immersed in it he can respond with tenderness and patience when he deals with sinners. The High Priest has firsthand knowledge of his own

weakness which enables him to be gentle and bear patiently with sinners as they struggle. This is what is needed - a high priest who practices forbearance and yet deals seriously with the sin and patiently with the sinner.

- **Verse 3** teaches us that the High Priest must be without sin in order for him to represent sinners before God. He must understand sin and yet be without sin. This is where we find the superiority of Christ's priesthood for only Jesus is the sinless priest that has ever represented mankind before God.

- **Verses 4-5:** In Christ, we have the second person of the Trinity, the very Son of God, the very God Himself come in the flesh to be the fully human, fully God, Great High Priest for His people and represent them before the Father.
- **Verses 5-6** teach us that Jesus' priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood found in the Old Testament because Jesus' priesthood is founded in the order of Melchizedek and not Aaron. I do not have time to unpack Melchizedek's priesthood but what we know is that when Melchizedek showed up in Genesis and blessed Abraham he was King of Salem and a Priest of the Most High God. We do not know anything about his beginning or end and Hebrews teaches us that Jesus' priesthood is in this line, which is superior to Aaron's line.
- **We need a superior priesthood to represent us before God.**

## 2. We need a Great High Priest to qualify the unqualified (Hebrews 5:7-10)

- Because Jesus is qualified, He can represent us before God as our Mediator of a new and better covenant. Let's work through vv. 7-10 . . .
- **Verse 7:** Verse 7 is loaded. In it we see that Christ was beset (immersed in weakness) yet He lived by faith in God. Jesus' prayers during His earthly life were intense cries to God to save him while he was living His life. Jesus was living by faith and trusting God, He was suffering and serving others and the weakness of His flesh was wearing him down but by faith He sought God for strength. By faith He sought God to keep him from sinning and He never did sin.
- **Verses 8-9:** Verses 8-9 are saying is that Jesus is completely qualified to qualify us before God. "*Being made perfect*" does not mean He was not perfect but the Greek word *perfect* means complete and He is complete because He completely experienced life as we know it and never sinned and that qualified Him to qualify us before God. He is our source of eternal salvation eternally.
- **Verse 10:** This is why the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek is superior to the Levitical priesthood and is therefore the order that Jesus is in.
- We need a Great High Priest to represent us before and to qualify us before God. Jesus is qualified to be our Great High Priest and qualify those who are unqualified to stand before God.

## 3. We need a GHP to who loves us (Hebrews 4:14-16) [How does He love us?]

- We are working backwards so we can hear the exhortation in Hebrews 4:14-16 with fresh ears and hopefully gain a fresh appreciation for how Christ has loved us as our High Priest.
- **How does He love us? He meets us where we are:** "*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens . . .*" He immersed Himself in our misery.
- **How does He love us? He calls us to hold fast to the gospel not with a one-time laying hold of the gospel by faith but with a lifetime laying hold of the gospel:** (v. 14)

**We are enabled to hold fast to our confession of faith because when Jesus was immersed in weakness on this earth, by faith, He always held fast. His love for us empowers us to hold fast.** He gives us strength not for a one-time laying hold of the gospel by faith but for a lifetime of laying hold of the gospel. Because He held fast He enables us to hold fast.

This is how He deals gently with our weaknesses. He measures our faith to us so that we will seize the gospel and will not let go.

- **How does He love us? He takes us before the throne of God:** *"Let us then with **confidence** draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*

In v. 14 we see that Jesus meets us where we are to take us where we need to go, before the throne of God. We can only go boldly before the throne of God by the broken body and the blood of Jesus. The Lord's Supper that we will take at the end reminds us of our confidence before the throne of God.

- This is our Great High Priest who has created for Himself a priesthood of believers to incarnate His work on this earth in little outposts called local churches. It is from the base of the local churches that the priests of God are the ambassadors of God to do the work of God.

## **II. So you are in the priesthood—now what? What does it mean to be a priesthood of believers in a local church? (Hebrews 4:14-5:10; 10:19-25)**

**Verses 19-21** remind us of what we just covered, that the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer, from beginning to end, is rooted and grounded in Jesus work as our Great High Priest. Yet this is not just high doctrine. Being called into the priesthood to serve with Christ immerses us in His ministry with us and with one another. This is where it gets messy. This is where we get immersed with Christ in the weaknesses of one another while we are beset with weaknesses ourselves.

**The priesthood of believers gets to the heart of who we are as a church.** It gets to the heart of what it means to be congregational. It gets to the heart of what **covenant membership** in a local church and what it means to live life together because covenant membership in a local congregational church means we have the responsibility to exercise watchfulness over one another's souls. It is not just the responsibility of the paid staff or the elders.

The priesthood of the believer is what it means to be a congregational church and how to live life together. *The very nature of the gospel that calls us into a priesthood of believers is the responsibility to exercise some sort of watchfulness in our lives together as a church.*

**The application of what we do as a priesthood of believers is found in Hebrews 10:22-25. The outline of the application is seen in the text in the cardinal virtues of faith, hope and love.**

### **1. Faith: We must remind one another of the person and work of Christ on our behalf (v. 22)**

- **We are to draw near to God how?** In faith, with a sincere heart, an undivided heart, a heart that is full of assurance in Christ and what he has done on our behalf. This is a heart that has confidence in Christ's work on his or her behalf. **Verse 22** points back at all of the exhortations to have confidence that we have already seen in:
  - **Hebrews 10:19**, *"Therefore, brothers, since we have **confidence** to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus."*
  - **Hebrews 4:16**, *"Let us then with **confidence** draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*
  - **Hebrews 3:14**, *"For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original **confidence** firm to the end."*
- **As a priesthood of believers we remind one another that our acceptance before God is not based on our works/performance**

**but on the work of another—the person and work of Jesus.** We draw near to God based on Christ's work.

- Do you ever feel far from God because of something you have done? Some sin you have committed? Do you find it difficult to believe that God will receive you because perhaps you have missed church a lot or because you did not live up to your own expectations?

When we hit those moments in our lives, we believe that God will not receive us and because of our sin and our failures we cannot come to Him with our prayers or problems. It is in these moments we must be reminded from the word of God and by other believers who are exercising their ministry as a priesthood of believers that we are received by God based on Christ's work. It is an evil conscience that says *God does not love me and will not receive me*. It is evil because in that moment we are trying to please God by our own righteousness instead of trusting in Christ's righteousness. It is in these moments we need to hear from the Spirit of God to speak through the priesthood of believers the gospel of God so that we are reminded that we draw near to God based on Jesus' High Priestly work.

- **Our work as a royal priesthood is to point others to the Great High Priest.** This is the lifeblood of congregationalism and covenant membership in a local church. Oh sure you can encourage all believers to hold fast but our first responsibility as a church is to call one another to draw near to God in these moments.
- **Like Jesus met us at our point of need, we meet people where they are and urge them to hold fast.** We pray for them and meet with them. We call them on the phone, we email them, we text them and we do whatever it takes to keep reaching out to them. This is our ministry as a priesthood of believers.

## 2. Hope: We must urge one another to hold fast in hope when suffering comes into our lives (v. 23)

- Hebrews was written to a suffering church, a church in the middle of persecution. All of these verses come to us with the force to call the church to hold fast but we hear in v. 23 a particular application when the writer of Hebrews says, "*hold fast to your confession without wavering for he who promises is faithful*." It is in the middle of suffering that we will lose hope and our faith in the promises of God will waver.
- **Illst:** It is Helen Stirk saying to her husband just before he dies for his faith in Christ, "*Husband, be glad, for we have lived together many joyful days, and this day, in which we must die, we ought to esteem the most joyful of all, because we shall have joy forever. Therefore I will not bid you good night, for we shall shortly meet in the kingdom of heaven*."
- **I hope we never see this kind of suffering and persecution in our lives.** Yet if we do we must have a culture of encouragement and discipleship that aims to help one another in the middle of suffering, pain, loss, temptation and trial.
- **Do you want to carry out your ministry as a royal priesthood, then immerse yourself in someone's weaknesses/suffering/struggle/misery/trials.** Surround yourself with it, if you can so you can encourage those who are suffering. Make a regular trip to the hospital to visit our church members. Regularly call on someone who has had a death in his or her family in order to encourage them. Get in the habit of making hospital visits to those going through trials. This is the ministry of the priesthood of the believers. This is what congregationalism is; this is what membership in a local church is.

## 3. Love: We must stir up one another to love and good works in the (vv. 24-25)

There are two parts to vv. 24-25. There is the problem and the solution

- **The Problem: People were neglecting to gather together as a church: (v. 25) "*neglect meeting together, as is the habit of some . . .*"**
  - **What is this saying?** We are exhorted to meet together and not neglect meeting together. We are sinners and we are

prone to not practice the habits of grace that help us grow in our relationship with Christ. When Christians neglect meeting together it affects everything in their lives.

- **Neglecting to gather with the church is bad for you.** It is bad for your spiritual health. It is bad for your family. It is bad for the rest of the church. You see if you are a believer and you are neglecting to gather with the church body to worship Jesus then it just does not affect you, it actually affects everyone around you. It is like a rock thrown in a pond where the ripple effects of the waves move out and disturb the water.
- This was the problem in that church.
- **The Solution: The ministry of the priesthood of believers.**
- **Verses 24-25 is telling us what we should do: “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.”**
  - **When you meet together what should occur? “. . . CONSIDER . . . one another. . .” v. 24**

**Consider (v. 24):** These are two Greek words put together to increase the intensity of the word. It means, “to direct one’s whole mind to an object for the goal of immersing one’s self in it in order to comprehend everything about it. It means to study those you with whom you meet because you love them.”

It means when you meet with other believers you are to give loving, critical observation and care to the other members. Look into their eyes and listen to what they say. Are they bearing a burden? Are they in pain physically or emotionally? Are they depressed? Do they have a need? Perhaps they need exhortation, accountability or a rebuke? On the other hand, sometimes we are the one who hurts and we need help. We need to share with a trusted brother/sister in our small group.

**This passage is both humbling and frightening.** We have to admit that we desperately need the very people that we will try to hide from. The fact is that an accurate knowledge of ourselves can only occur when we are actively engaged in a loving community of faith that seeks to *consider one another*.

**Let’s just be honest, our tendency toward personal blindness** is so deep that we need the active engagement of a priesthood of believers to pursue us. By withdrawing and insulating ourselves from other people we only keep ourselves from seeing ourselves in an accurate way. It keeps us from pursuing a God-honoring life in a broken world.<sup>2</sup>

- **. . . STIR UP . . . one another to love and good works.**

**Stir Up (v. 24)** This is also an intense word. To *stir up* someone to love and good works is crucial. When the storms of life come in sometimes our love for Christ grows cold.

We need someone to stir up our love for Christ, and others and be reminded of Christ’s love of us. We need to come to church more not less. I touched on this a little last Sunday but the fact is that when the pressure is on us in life we tend to gather with the saints less and less. It is in that moment when we need someone to stir us up.

**Illst: What does it mean to be stirred up?** Have you ever had a squeak on a car that is a constant source of irritation? Stacy has. For months, Stacy asked me to fix it. It was a consistent source of irritation for her but I never drove it so it did not bother me. Then she began to talk about buying a new Suburban and I got *stirred up* and fixed it.

The word **STIR UP** is kind of like the squeak in a car. It carries a kind of negative meaning except the writer does something interesting here. He marries it to the command of love and good works. We are to stir one another to love for others and Christ and for good works.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul David Tripp, *A Broken Down House*, 156-157.

We do not just **STIR UP** one another once but we become that constant squeak of encouraging words—not as a source of irritation but of love, care, kindness and strength. **It is not that we are a constant source of irritation, like the squeak on a car, but a constant source of encouragement.**

The priesthood of believers are considering one another and constantly encouraging one another to attend worship, small groups and our Foundations studies!

- When do you do it? “. . . ALL THE MORE as you see the Day drawing near . . .”

#### Conclusion

Lord’s Supper is our application. It is our reminder of what Christ has done for us to give us confidence to stand before God.