
PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS: A LEGACY OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION AND ITS IMPLICATION ON THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH

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Abstract

The priesthood of all believers was one of the cardinal principles of the sixteenth century protestant Reformation. While the Reformers used the doctrine/principle of all believers to buttress the evangelical understanding of the Church against the sacerdotalism of medieval Catholicism; the ecclesial context has always been misconstrued and misapplied by the church in the 21st century. This paper therefore, seeksto clarify the misconception and refocus the principle of priesthood of all believers, to reflect its contextual understanding;and also to explore the implications of such misconception on the 21st century church. To achieve this, the researcher adopts a historical and analytic approach. The paper argues that the current application of the doctrine by the 21st century is not congruent with the reformers understanding which is in worth rather than in function. It further identifies the priestly roles of the believer to include: direct access to God, holy living, and reconciliation. The paper identifies some major implications of the misapplication on the 21st century church such as: indiscriminate setting up of churches/ministries, development of roadside theology, weakening of the power of ecumenism, and religious individualism. The paper further argues that, although the principle of the priesthood of all believers has achieved great religious freedom for all believers, however, it has been misapplied by the 21st century church leading to moral and spiritual decadence instead of improving it. The paper therefore challenges men and women of God, scholars and teachers of the word of truth not to spend time rejecting the biblical justification of this doctrine, rather, they should seek to clarify, refocus and put it in proper perspective for the church's application in order to improve the spirituality of the 21st century church.

Key words: Priesthood, Believer, Legacy, Protestant Reformation, Church

INTRODUCTION

The priesthood of all believers was one of the rediscoveries of the great Reformation of the sixteenth century. This was the movement that reformed certain doctrines and practices of the Church of Rome which resulted in the establishment of protestant churches. The protestant churches celebrated 500th anniversary in 2017. The rise of theReformation era owes a great deal to the theological debates on the status and role of the lay people. Between 1517 and 1521, Martin Luther was at the center of an escalating conflict that led to his excommunication and definite break with the Church of Rome. It was during these years that Martin Luther set forth

what later scholars have referred to as the “*Principles of the Reformation*.” These are teachings that triggered the Reformation as encapsulated in the words of Kendall (222-223) as *Sola gratia* (grace alone), *Sola fidei* (faith alone), and *Sola scriptura* (scripture alone). Parallel to these core principles or theology of the reformers are the centrality of preaching as opposed to the centrality of the Eucharist, opposition to praying to the Virgin Mary and to the saints, and the Priesthood of all believers.

The medieval sacerdotalism obscured the basic truth of the gospel as it concerned several issues. Coleman noted that the Protestant Reformation therefore, gave a central focus and relevance to sub-merged doctrines of the Bible on which was *the Priesthood of all believers* (216). However, unfortunately, this biblically oriented doctrine has been so misunderstood over the years, leading to misapplications. Ewald Plass rightly observed that this doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has come in consequence of errors which have developed to receive in the controversies of later centuries stronger emphasis than it did at first (38). This paper therefore, seeks to refocus it for proper understanding and application by the church and all believers.

CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

Priesthood: the word “priesthood” is a derivation of Hebrew word “Kohen” and “Sacerdos” in Latin. It refers to the office of the Israelite priesthood (Renn 758). The word first appeared as applied to Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18), in pre-Aaronic priesthood. While the word priesthood refers to the office, a priest in effect is a mediator who stands between God and man. According to Wayne Jack, the priest offers sacrifice to God on behalf of man and administers other worship obligations that man feels unworthy to offer personally (<https://www.>).

Believer: The Webster Online Dictionary defines a believer as someone who is persuaded of the truth or reality of some doctrine, person or thing (<https://www.>). As applied to this presentation, is a person who believes in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ for his personal salvation. He is someone who gives credit to the truth of scripture and receives Christ as his saviour.

Legacy: this means something that is bequeathed or handed over by a predecessor.

Protestant Reformation: this is a religious revolution that took place in the sixteenth century which led to schism that divided the Roman Catholic Church; which resulted in the creation of Protestant Churches, thereby ending the old unity of the Christendom. Although Protestantism itself seems to carry a negative connotation, Shelley however, perceived it as “a modification of Catholicism in which Catholic problems remain, but different solutions are given” (248).

Church: the term church as used in this paper is an assembly of believers which could be institutional or organic. An institutional church is that Bosch referred to as a church designated and organized with hierarchical administrative structure, dogmatic learning policy, constitutional matters and denominational name. This includes all the denominational churches irrespective of their status or classifications (cited in Pokol 2). While the organic church is made up of only those who have genuinely experienced conversion and live in active fellowship with Jesus Christ. The organic church has other nomenclature such as true church, universal church and invisible church, since the members are known only to God.

THE RISE OF PRIESTHOOD: OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE

The presence of “priesthood” has been a characteristic of virtually every society of cultured man since the beginning of time. For instance, the ancient Assyrians had priests as did Babylonians. Wayne Jackson noted that when Abraham was returning from the rescue of his nephew, Lot, he encountered Melchizedek, who was said to be not only king of Salem, but also

a “priest of God most high”. He maintained that in acknowledgement of his sacred office, he paid tithes to him (Gen 14:14ff). Also Joseph's wife “Asenath” was the daughter of the priest of On (Gen 41:45)(<https://www.>) From the above assertion, it is indisputable that priesthood is a practice that every culture was familiar with.

Priestly activities began in the Old Testament after the fall of man when God demonstrated to man the way to reach him by sacrificing an animal, first for the purpose of atoning for man's sin of disobedience before using the skin to cover their nakedness. This means of reaching God (sacrifice) as demonstrated by God continued from that moment as could be seen in the fourth chapter of Genesis when Cain and Abel brought their sacrifices before God (Gen. 4). This practice continued even to the patriarchal period that which Jackson referred to as the first period of the Bible history. Jackson posited that it encompassed that era between the creation and the formation of Israel into a nation at Sinai. He maintained that the term “*Patriarch*” is a derivative of two root words meaning “*Father Rule*” (<https://www.>). Thus, priesthood during the patriarchal age was saddled on the family heads. For instance, Noah offered sacrifices on behalf of his family after the flood (Gen. 8:20-21), Abraham offered sacrifices at Shechem (Gen. 12:7, 22:13), Job the patriarch of Uz offered sacrifices as the head of the family (Job 1:5). However, the institution of the Levitical priesthood, striped the heads of the families of their ancient privilege of offering sacrifice and performing other priestly functions.

LEVITICAL/AARONIC PRIESTHOOD

The formal inauguration of priesthood was during the mosaic dispensation known as '*Levitical or Aaronic'priesthood*, after the given of the law (Num. 3:10), which hitherto, the elders of Israel constituted the priestly caste who were required to sanctify themselves preparatory to the reception of the law at Sinai (Exo. 19:22-25) (Jackson). The Levitical or Aaronic priesthood came with certain restrictions, first of which was hereditary, as the entire priests descended from Aaron, exclusively masculine and reserved for the physically fitted (Lev. 22:3).

These priests continued with their mediator y role between man and God, they were also saddled with the responsibility of offering the daily prayers, weekly, monthly and yearly sacrifices to atone for the people's sins, thus living holy lives was inevitable on their part.

Kendall opined that the Old Testament priesthood was hierarchical which included the high priests, priests and Levites each with its distinct functions and privileges (234). At the bottom of the priestly hierarchy or caste were the Levites who numbered 10,000 and divided into twenty four courses. Their chief functions were music and various forms of services connected with the temple. They attended to their duty by a lot. This priestly role is a testimony to the fact that man feels that he is without merit to atone for his own sins. He therefore longs and gropes after some methods for pardon.

During the monarchy, the priestly caste had become so developed that there was a remarkable shift in the concept. At the period, a sharp distinction was made between the priestly caste and the common people. The King took charge of everything, while the priests became responsible for religious matters.

NEW TESTAMENT PRIESTHOOD

In the New Testament, the Greek word “*hierateuma*” (priesthood) is not found with reference to the Jewish priesthood. Until the fall of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple, priestly activities were carefully carried on according to the Old Testament prescription. Thus, there is nothing new or striking in the numerous New Testament references in relation to their work because of the strong connection between the priestly caste in the Old Testament and the New

Testament regime. In the words of Richardson, “The New Testament speaks of priesthood in the corporate manner to refer to the entire Christian community, and the word “Sacerdos” (priest) is never used in respect to any priestly order or caste within the priestly community.”(301). Kendall while corroborating the above position also maintained that in no instance does any New Testament writer ascribed the title of priest to any individual member or order of ministry in the Church (238). New Testament priesthood is rooted in the redemptive, sacrificial and mediatory work of Jesus Christ which the Old Testament priesthood foreshadowed. The Old Testament priesthood was therefore typical, as the priest prefigured the Great high priest who offered “one sacrifice for the sins of all” (Hebrews 10:10-12).

The Levitical priesthood which was pictorial and preparatory in nature found fulfilment in the New Testament believers through Christ's ministry as symbolized by the tearing of the curtain separating the holy of holies from the other parts of temple (Jackson <https://www.>). The book of Hebrew sets forth the activity of Jesus as priest and high priest, great emphasis is laid on these aspects of his work. Concerning his priestly activities, he is a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS' PRIESTLY ROLES

The priestly role of Jesus is very significant as it brought a new order in the priestly caste (ministry). Kendall identifies the following significance:

1. It opened the door for every genuine believer seeking God to have direct and unlimited access to God. This was symbolized by the tearing of the veil separating the holy of holies from other parts of the temple.
2. It opened an unrestricted ministry for all, categories of people, males, females, all age groups and even the physically challenged, because all are of equal worth and status (Gal. 3:26-28), which was never so in the Levitical priesthood.
3. Priests (those called into ministry) are no longer born, but made or converted (Acts 6:7).
4. It established a once and for all eternal mediator ship between man and God (236-237).

PRIESTHOOD DURING THE MIEVEALAGES

During the medieval period from about the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, the clergy had developed into a separate and powerful caste which came to be referred to as “*the temporal*” and “*the spiritual*”. The laity was referred to as the temporal estate, while the clergy as the spiritual estate. This made the priest during the medieval ages to become the laity's most direct conduit to the church. Atkinson well observed that the benefits of the clergy during this era were far above the law and outside its reach (95).

Luther therefore, sought for a way to simplify Christianity. During this period, the authority of ministry reposed solely in the clergy. The status of lay people both in principle and practice was not only subordinate to the priests, but also widened the gap between the clergy and the laity. While arguing on the same pedestal McManners avers that this gap became synonymous with the *sacred and the profane*, referring to the clergy and the laity respectively (40). Norton (41) remarks that at the core of the historical context of the reformation was the sacerdotal ministry of the clergy. He observes further that without the officially ordained clergy, there was no church. This means that the mediatory work of the priest was necessary for salvation, since the priesthood was presumed to carry the ability to bar the way to God. Those who were troubled with their sins were told to not go to God, rather to a man often of known moral

obliquity to confess their sins before him because he was a priest (Atkinson 97) This implies that without the mediatory role of the priest, the troubled sinner would never have his sins forgiven by God. He lamented further that the church which ought to have shown the glorious openness of God's presence, his pure and immediate accessibility to all, fenced off his presence with a triple wall of defence through which no man could gain entrances unless administered by the priests (97). Collison Corroborates thus: "Hence, during the dawn of the reformation, the church existed even without the participation of the lay people. Consequently, the Reformation rose in reaction to such deplorable conditions of the institutionalized religion" (245)

It was in the wake of the above conditions that Martin Luther toll the bell that called forth new religious awakening. The unquestionable and universal belief of medieval piety that the mediatory work of the priest was necessary for salvation was confronted by the new found theology, "*the priesthood of all believers*." In Kraemer's view the Reformation was mainly a movement of the lay people (32).

PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS DURING THE REFORMATION

During the Reformation era, the concept of the priesthood of all believers became very contentious within the structures of the institutional church. The Reformation era provides a framework in tracing the concept of the priesthood of all believers. Over the centuries, the Roman Catholic hierarchy and other religious groups made sharp distinction between the clergy and the laity; such was alien to the early Church. Clement of Rome (AD 95) is said to be the first person to make such distinction. Latourette pointed that at the dawn of the reformation era, the institutionalized church already had two major distinguished bodies within the believers: The clergy and the laity with an evident tyranny of the former over the later (38).

LUTHER'S ARGUMENT ABOUT THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

Luther formulated the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers with foundational scriptures to building his argument. The first scripture was from Exo. 19:5-6. "*Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.*" (NIV) The second text was from 1Pt.2:9 "*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*" (NIV) Luther affirmed this in his treaty of 1520, where he articulated his theology in both the "*Babylonian captivity of the church and in his letter to the Christian nobility of German nation*" that all believers are priests. He criticized the traditional distinction between "*temporal and spiritual*" estates – *the laity and the clergy*. He argued that all who belonged to Christ through faith, baptism and the gospel share in the priesthood of Christ; and belonged to the spiritual estate, and there is no difference between them except that of office. That whatever vocation they chose is a spiritual exercise because Christ was in them. Wengert opines that Luther based his theology on the basis of one baptism received by all believers and 1Pet. 2:19 in which the church is described as a *royal priesthood* (409). According to Hagner, "as the Levitical priests were consecrated to their office by washing of water, all believers enter into their priestly functions at the point of baptism" (165). Luther argued that as far as the spiritual position (status before God), privileges and responsibility go, the laity and the clergy are on the same level. He added that men and women living their lives in the home and on the farm, in workshops or civic office fulfil God's will for them in secular works as much as any religious man in his vocation (Atkinson 103) He maintained that the disparity between clergy and laity is not that the clergy have a "higher" spiritual vocation and

laity a “lower” secular vocation. All alike are of the same footing, justified by faith. Although the clergy are simply men called out of the community, trained and appointed to fulfil pastoral duties; their function does not make them holier than the farmer or merchant. A careful analysis of the above shows that the priesthood of all believers is not in functions, but in their worth and status before God; since he acknowledged that even among the community of believers some are called out, for trained and appointed to fulfil certain functions. Thus, those who are called out are not called to priesthood but to the ministry of the church. He referred to the present priesthood order as “*churchy priesthood*,” because it grew out of the church organization. The proper name therefore, should be ministers, servants, elders etc (104). The idea of priesthood of all believers certainly never meant that everyone is a priest who could take on the ministry of preaching and cure for souls. This is because Luther in the above discussion emphasized theological knowledge, special training and precise personal qualities as foremost requirements for those called out for pastoral ministry. Atkinson (106) remarks further from Luther's writing that the congregation is not to be like a pack of woman in the market place, everyone wanting to speak, no one to listen.

This implies that Luther himself acknowledged the importance of leadership in every congregation and that some should only listen and not speak that which is lacking in most congregations today, since everyone wants to speak. This is largely due to the postulations of Luther as quoted by John Mueller who wrote “for though we are not all in the public office or calling, still every believer should teach, instruct, exhort, confront and reprove his neighbour whenever and wherever anyone is in need of it (566).

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS ON THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH

The misconception about this doctrine has had grievous implications on the church, some of which are discussed below:

- 1. Indiscriminate springing up of Churches and ministries:** Many churches and ministries have been established and are still being established, even by people without the proper understanding of the scripture or any pastoral training. Whenever there is conflict, some members of the congregation always resort to setting up their own churches rather than working assiduously toward settling the conflict. This is because there is no control over who should set up a church, since it is always claimed that every believer can read, understand and interpret the Bible, all are priests.
- 2. Development of Roadside theology:** Because churches are set up by people without any formal theological training, roadside theologies have always ensued. They interpret scriptural passages without paying attention to the cultural, geographical, and historical contexts. Furthermore, theologies have been developed from a single passage not minding what other passages of scripture have said about the issue in contention.
- 3. Increased spiritual and moral bankruptcy:** Exercising discipline on erring members of the church is difficult for fear of losing them to other churches/ministries, which have no moral and spiritual standards. In most of these places, the so called “men of God” are the moral and spiritual standards of the members rather than the scripture; thus, members are no longer afraid of community sin even in public, since they have many options even if they are disciplined. This has weakened the significance of discipline in the 21st century. Thus, spirituality and

morally have been completely watered down instead of improving.

It has weakened the power of Ecumenism: Throughout the history of the church, ecumenical councils have always been held to checkmate heresies. For instance, The Jerusalem council was held to address the heresy that the Gentiles could not become Christians without first becoming Jews through circumcision and observing the Mosaic Law (Acts 15), the council of Nicaea in AD 325 which addressed the heresy about the relationship of the Son to the Father (Arianism), the council of Ephesus in AD 432 which countered the heresy about the two natures of the Son (Nestorianism) (Kindell 240). With this sad development of indiscriminate springing up of churches/ministry, heretical teachings have been on the increase because there is nobody that is saddled with the responsibility of censoring theologies and meting punishment on heretics. Every preacher preaches and teaches whatever he feels under the pretext that he is being led by the Holy Spirit, even when it is obvious that it is a heresy.

4. **Clash over functions:** in most protestant churches, the members clash over functions for which some people have been called and trained to perform. In some congregations, the Pastor cannot preach twice without being challenged by the members to be given the opportunity to preach also, thus, the Pastors and members continually fight over the pulpit. Although, we are all priests (by our status), however, this does not mean there are not special functions that are largely required of called ones.
5. **Religious individualism:** Some people have reluctantly attended fellowship with other Christians under the pretext that even in their closets they can have direct fellowship with God. Does the priesthood of all believers then mean “I am on my own” even negating fellowship which is scriptural instruction? George advises that the universal priesthood expressed not religious individualism, but the direct opposite, the reality of the congregation as a community (<https://www.>). In the light of the above, weighty negative implications, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has rather plunged the 21st century church into spiritual decadence of the highest order rather than improve it.

THE IDEAL PRIESTLY ROLE OF THE BELIEVER

The devastating implications of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers on the 21st century church have made it necessary to refocus the teaching to the scriptural priesthood of all believers:

1. **Access to God:** As a priest, the believer is worthy to appear before God boldly in the spirit of faith and be able to cry out “Abba father!” Rogers notes that the Priesthood of all believers is the immediacy of access to God (121). Young described it as “*soul competency*” meaning that all believers are capable of approaching God directly without the interference or assistance of an intermediary (as obtained in the Old Testament and during medieval Catholicism) (131). He further maintained that *soul competency* is understood from a sociological perspective rather than political as “*Religious liberty*” which gives full freedom to believers to worship God according to their own interest and needs with no coercion from the state, church or individuals (131). From the above arguments, it is crystal clear that the priesthood of all believers therefore, means that every genuine seeker of God has direct, immediate and unlimited

access to the presence of God. This is because the once and for all mediatory work of Christ has annulled the mediatory role of the priest, as symbolized by the tearing apart of the curtain in the temple from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51).

2. **Sacrifice:** The believer's priestly role is to offer sacrifices not of bulls and goats but of himself, according to Rom. 12:1, this is in addition to the sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15). Thanksgiving, repentance, justice, kindness and love (2 Pet. 2:5). Each Christian therefore, is a priest who has an office of sacrifice not mass, but dedication of himself to the praise of and obedience to God.
3. **Holy Living:** Every believer has the priestly role of living a holy life for himself, not as obtained in the Old Testament and during medieval Catholicism where the people depended on the holiness of one man (the priest). The priest sanctified himself to represent the people before God with his own holiness, rather than theirs, that which is now the responsibility of every believer (1 Pet. 1:15-16), in order to access God, without which God is inaccessible (Heb. 12:16). Holy living is therefore no longer by proxy, but the vicarious experience of every believer (Kendall 236).
4. **Reconciliation:** Another priestly role of the believer is to act as an agent of reconciliation. Just as the priests acted as agents of reconciliation, all believers are agents of reconciliation between God and others as they share Christ to the dying world (2Cor, 5:18-19).
5. **Worship:** as a priest every believer has the responsibility to worship and praise God personally. This is opposed to the Old Testament and Medieval Catholicism, where only the Levites praised God in songson behalf of the people.

Conclusion: in conclusion, although the priesthood of all believers in the fullest sense is a Biblical doctrine (Exo. 19:4-6; 2Pt. 2:9), which has achieved great religious freedom for all believers. However, its content is richer than that which is generally understood. This development has led to misconceptions that have plunged the 21st century Church into unimaginable moral and spiritual bankruptcy instead of improving it. Our responsibility therefore, as called men and women of God, scholars and teachers of the word is not to spend time rejecting its Biblical justification, rather, seeking to clarify, refocus and put it in proper perspective for the spiritual improvement of the 21st century church. We must re-orientate believers to come to the conscious understanding of the indisputable fact that all believers in Christ are of the same status and worth before God; and that every legal vocation they choose is sacred and a spiritual exercise in the sight of God to whom they will give account (2 Cor. 5:10). Timothy George's comment sums up my thoughts as according to him the priesthood of all believers is not only a spiritual privilege, but a moral obligation and personal vocation (<https://www.>). I therefore conclude with the words of James Atkinson while commenting on the significance of the Reformation says 'Luther's significance for this century, indeed for any century, is the same now as it was in the sixteenth: to show the significance of Christ and open up every age to a living reformation of what has perpetually suffers deformation'(105).

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