

# The Priesthood of All Believers

*Hebrews 10:19-25*

– Opening Prayer –

## Introduction

Think for a moment about the kinds of comments you make on Sunday afternoons about the worship service or about the morning gathering. Or if you aren't one to *openly* criticize, think of the one-sided conversations you have with yourself. Our criticisms about worship can help us understand what we really believe about the nature of worship – its meaning and purpose.

But we hardly have anything to complain about compared to those who had to suffer through pre-reformation worship services. By the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, congregants had become passive observers and ignorant spectators, held captive to services led in a foreign language. A priest would often even make the typical congregational responses on their behalf since they couldn't! Either highly trained choirs singing very difficult music or priests chanting the Latin liturgy made up the singing. The people could bring their bodies to the services, but their minds and hearts could take no part at all. And while sermons in the language of the people were prescribed quarterly, many local churches preached even less than this. If this described your Sunday worship, imagine the kinds of criticisms you might have made on your walk home!

Don't many of our criticisms start with "if only..."? And what do we think would have happened *if only*? Perhaps a greater sense of the presence of God, something unexpected, a strong desire for holiness, or even just a lasting sense of peace and encouragement? We often believe that something or someone was missing, and if it were present then we would have "really" worshipped.

Or think about how we imagine God's disposition towards us in worship. Do we often feel that there's a coldness flowing from heaven to earth in our direction? Perhaps if we had gotten our act together better this week he'd be excited to meet with us. Instead, we have "guilty dog" of the heart, not really wanting to look up with confidence to God, hoping to prove to him that we're sorry by our hesitant distance.

Our criticisms often reveal two underlying assumptions:

- 1) The goal of worship is to have a certain kind of experience

- 2) *If only* we had something that was missing, we could have experienced it. Or to use a biblical term, if only we had a *mediator* – something to help us connect with God – we could have *really* worshipped. And we can look to *anything* as a mediator – the right kind of ambiance, liturgy, dynamic preaching, sermon type, musical style, type of hymns, type of worship leader, the list could go on and on.

We see this reliance on earthly mediators both when we are thrilled by a certain skilled preacher or when we are coldly critical of the unfamiliar hymn. Both sides hold worship captive to a mediator that can never truly deliver. That's because there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.

When I visited dozens of churches a few years ago, part of my goal was to understand and yes – to be critical – of the worship practices of our churches, so that I might treasure biblical worship and be a better leader. My expectations waned to the point where I was excited if I found just one thing – a celebration ... or even a *mention* of Jesus. Sadly, this often did not happen. If the Bible teaches that Jesus is our great high priest and that our worship is in and through Him, He should take center stage. But how does that happen practically? Biblically, it happens in a somewhat counter-intuitive way – rather than needing skilled professionals to serve us Christ, we are all to serve Him to each other as we encourage and edify one another. The church often operates from a deep misunderstanding about how worship has been transformed by Jesus, what the role of clergy is, and what the role of the people is in worship. And this misunderstanding isn't new – it is the same one that was happening in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The reformers championed a doctrine later called the “priesthood of all believers” which teaches that all Christians are priests and that there is no special class of clergy who is uniquely able to mediate access with God.

## **The Text**

We're going to consider how Hebrews 10 presents this doctrine and how it should shape our worship.

### Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the

habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

This passage is clearly about the priesthood. When the author says, “we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood” he is calling to mind the Levitical priests of the Old Testament. They had to be sprinkled with blood before entering into the inner courts of the temple, the place where God dwelled. They had to be cleansed, to have their sins atoned for. And since “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to [actually] take away sins” (v. 4) the priests had to be prepared in this way *every time* they approached God. But notice something very different here – *who* is commanded to enter the holy places? Only certain specially chosen and qualified people like the Levites? No – instead it is all believers, or “brothers and sisters.” We are all commanded to participate in what was formerly priestly work. But what did the ancient priests actually do?

### **The Work of the Priests**

When you consider all that they did, you might actually call them community service workers! While a great title might be “guardians of God’s holiness,” they performed very practical yet inglorious roles:

- Housekeepers and janitors. You think you’ve had terrible messes to clean up with babies and toddlers? Try cleaning up a slaughterhouse!
- Bouncers
- Officiants of sacrificial rites
- Butchers
- Bakers
- Butlers
- Smoke signal operators

There was a spiritual dimension to each aspect of their work. Each one had double duty – to the literal house of the temple and to the spiritual house of God’s people. When they cleaned house, they were restoring and preparing worshippers for fellowship with God. When they prevented others from entering into a holy place, they protected their lives and the sanctity of God’s holiness. They prepared food for their tribe as a picture of God’s care and provision. They even had a special kind of bread called “bread of the presence” which they set as butlers at the table of the Lord, showing His hospitality and welcome. The smoke and smells were physical reminders of God’s reality and His desire to be present with His people.

The rest of Hebrews explains in great detail how Jesus has fulfilled the physical aspect of this priestly system and the outward rituals of Old Testament worship. So how then are we as believers in Jesus, as brothers and sisters, to perform priestly work? 1 Peter 2:5 puts it this way, “you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” And Romans 12:1: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” The *spiritual* dimension of the priestly work still applies to us. One author puts it eloquently this way:

We are all stationed as guardians of God’s holy house, now identical to the holy people, called to distinguish between holy and unclean and to maintain the purity of God’s household. All believers offer the sacrifice of praise through Jesus, the Bread of God. Every Christian offers the incense of prayer in the holy place of God’s house, and through practices of forbearance and forgiveness we keep God’s house clean. Through using the gifts given by the Spirit, each member of Christ’s body contributes to the edification of the whole. In the old order, priestly service was housekeeping. In the new order, all are priests, called to the ministry of bodybuilding.<sup>i</sup>

## **Come with Confidence**

And what should the prevailing attitude of our priestly work be? Look to verse 19. We are commanded to come before God with *confidence*, boldness, and assurance – without fear. But in the Old Testament we saw plenty of fear and trembling before the holy God! Traditional tells us of that they would tie a rope around the waist of the high priest when he entered the most holy place in case he died! On what basis can we serve in God’s presence not just *without* fear but *with* boldness? On the basis of the objective, finished, priestly work of Jesus by which he has positionally perfected us, having sprinkled and washed our souls so that we are prepared as priests. Look again to Hebrews 10:

... *by* the blood of Jesus, *by* the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, *through* his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God ... with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water

Ancient Jews were forbidden to come into God’s presence but believers in Jesus are *commanded* to come and to come with confidence and expectant joy! The basis of our belief that God accepts us and desires to meet with us is objective – the work of Jesus. Acceptance is not based on our performance or our emotional state. For all who believe

in Jesus, the veil that separated us from God – our sins – has been removed. Our confidence is based simply and solely on faith in Jesus as the one who mediates God’s presence. This is awesome! When we forgot this we’re left in a sorry state – where our self-consciousness, self-righteousness, self-reliance, *just self* ... or the flip-side of our famous preacher-reliance, skilled worship leader-reliance, or an other clergy-reliance – gets in the way of enjoying God’s presence. Another way of putting it is that when we take our eyes off of Jesus and place them onto anything or anyone else we begin to lose our way in worship.

## Serve the Community

If we were to stop here we might be left thinking that this passage is describing a personal worship experience, where we are invited to come into God’s presence much like the ancient high priest – individually. But we need to keep going in Hebrews 10. One of the great tragedies of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is that it was twisted to justify a “me and God” mentality where people saw little use for organized church or the work of clergy.

Hear how one commentator on Luther describes his view:

Luther never understands the priesthood of all believers merely in the sense of the Christian’s freedom to stand in a direct relationship to God without a human mediator. Rather, he constantly emphasizes the Christian’s evangelical authority to come before God on behalf of the brethren and also of the world. The universal priesthood expresses not religious individualism but its exact opposite, the reality of the congregation as a community.

But for Luther, the priesthood of all believers did not mean, “I am my own priest.” It meant rather: In the community of saints, God has so tempered the body that we are all priests to each other. We stand before God and intercede for one another, we proclaim God’s Word to one another and we celebrate his presence among us in worship, praise, and fellowship. Moreover, our priestly ministry does not terminate upon ourselves. It propels us into the world in service and witness.<sup>ii</sup>

And this is where our passage picks back up.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Here Hebrews is going on to describe the new nature of our transformed spiritual priestly duties. We each have a charge to minister to one another. While we do not need to prepare access or pave the way to God and cannot confer sacramental grace to

one another in religious ritual, our priestly task is summed up as encouragement or edification. In fact, edification is the defining characteristic of New Testament worship.

1 Corinthians 14:26 says, “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.” All of these participatory aspects serve the purpose of edification. But, you might argue, isn’t worship *for God*? Isn’t it about *His* glory? Can’t we get sidetracked focusing on one another? While worship is certainly a time to praise God directly, do not forget that obeying God’s commands shows Him to be worth obeying – worthy of worship. Put another way, he is glorified when the church performs its priestly duties to one another. We could change the phrase “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him<sup>iii</sup>” into “God is most glorified in the church when it is edifying one another.” We don’t always have to be speaking, singing, or praying to God *directly* to be worshipping Him.

This way of describing worship gets us much closer to a biblical understanding of the term. The word often used for worship denotes *service*, not a feeling. We’re drowning in a worship culture which assumes that the purpose of worship is to have a certain kind of feeling. While worship is certainly not less than experiencing God’s presence in a tangible, emotional way, it is much more. When we look beyond the personal worship experience and start seeing our congregation as one body, we realize that on our dry or weary days we’re being carried along by the fervor of others, and vice versa. Let God’s Word liberate us from the worship of emotions – masquerading as a desire for the presence of God – to a more healthy view of worship as a kingdom of priests, serving one other in love, for the glory of the one who *is* present with us. We’re not seeking His presence, we’re affirming it. I believe that this is one reason why many evangelicals are finding liturgical churches more appealing – the emphasis on the community rather than the individual is refreshing if not liberating.

As Baptists, we have not inherited a healthy tradition in this area. One author describes Baptist church gatherings like this: “The practical effect of the stress upon ‘soul competency’ [during the early decades of the twentieth century] as the cardinal doctrine of Baptists was to make every man’s hat his own church.”<sup>iv</sup>

## **Do Not Neglect Assembling**

Can you see why Hebrews says that we must not neglect meeting together? How can we perform our priestly duties without a congregation to perform them in? While we can certainly pray for others privately, that does not edify like face to face

encouragement. Technology has made it possible to communicate – and at some level, connect – with others while not being physically present, but it can never take the place of face to face gathering. We must realize that the Scripture doesn't just *suggest* that we meet with the church but *commands* it. Every believer is expected to be a part of a local church and to faithfully gather with it for worship and to encourage the body. Anything less is being disobedient to God. You need a local church and a local church needs you. If you continue to absent yourself or not participate in body life, you are depriving your brethren of the presence of God, and you are missing out on what worship was meant to be – more than a quiet time!

But I sympathize with the reasons that I hear for not regularly gathering with the church. One author wrote “With congregational singing going away, and communion no longer a weekly ordinance, there's only one avenue left to participate in the service – the offering. Is this really the message we want to send? Sit there, be quiet, and enjoy the show. And don't forget to give us money.” Ouch.

### **Back to the Reformation**

And this is where we circle back to the reformation. The reformers understood the principle of the duty and delight of all believer to participate in worship. They returned the Lord's Supper to the people as a regular observance. They transformed the clergy by emphasizing the New Testament title and role of pastor rather than priest – focusing on the ministry of the Word rather than sacraments or blatantly unbiblical duties such as selling indulgences. They were passionate about making God's people active participants in worship rather than passive observers. While worship looked very different outwardly among the branches of the reformation, they all developed traditions of congregational singing to tunes that shared more in common with folk songs than high classical melodies.

To apply the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is to treasure *participation* by the whole body. And singing is one of the primary activities that the entire church physically does together at the same time. It is a treasured gift of God and a means of prayer, teaching, exhorting, encouragement, celebration, lament ... the list could go on and on. Perhaps the lasting jewel of worship reforms from the 16<sup>th</sup> century is the traditional of congregational singing, which is why Luther would be turning in his grave at the worship practices of many churches today. We're unwittingly undoing some of the very things the reformation recovered!

Remember how I described the state of worship services before the reformation? Let me tweak a few words to illustrate my point:

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, congregants had become passive observers and ignorant spectators, held captive to services led in the foreign language of shallow, inaudible lyrics and vacuous preaching. The stage singers would often even make the typical congregational responses on their behalf since they weren't on microphones. Either highly trained choirs singing very difficult music or worship leaders singing too high with too much glissando made up the singing. The people could feel the bass in their chest cavities, but their minds and hearts (unless they loved arena rock) could take no part at all. And while sermons in the language of the people happened weekly, many made little mention of Jesus, rarely expounded scripture, and focused on practical principles for a better life.

But let's pause and step back for a moment. Just because we may not fit the criticisms I'm leveling of the worship practices of many churches does not for one moment mean that we have the corner on biblical worship! The last thing I want you to think and feel based on these (what I hope are valid) criticisms is condescension and self-righteousness. The New Testament left us no instruction regarding the precise order of our worship or what kinds of styles and forms to use. Rather, it has much to say about substance, and as we have seen it emphasizes spiritual realities rather than outward forms. Since God looks on the heart and sees every dimension of what's really going on week to week at Trinity, can you really justify feelings of superiority! Sure we may have healthy singing, gospel centered services and sermons, and proclaim Jesus every week, but do we gather expectantly in faith, looking for what God is saying and doing among His people each week? Do we leave transformed, or at least with a process of transformation begun in some area of our lives? Are we overcoming our insecurities or personal bitterness and reaching out in service and love into the lives of others? Or are we so afraid of people leaving the church that we hold back our hearts, not wanting the pain of trying to get closer to people only to have them seemingly reject us when they leave the church? Or maybe we're considering leaving ourselves, planning to silently slip away rather than love our brothers and sisters enough to struggle through explaining our differences or our hurts.

## **Jesus the Great Worshipper**

How can God accept dysfunction like this? How can we serve one another effectively? Oh church, do not forget that Jesus walks among us and offers acceptable worship to the Father on our behalf! Revelation 1:13 says that Jesus walks among the lampstands, which represent churches. Since Jesus is the great High Priest, He is



actually the great worshipper! In Hebrews 2:12, Jesus says to His Father, “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.” He is offering us not just atonement for sins, but acceptable worship on our behalf. One author describes this eloquently:

So when our worship feels dry, or our hearts are distracted, when we feel that our worship isn’t passionate enough, or that our faith is not profound enough, right at that point we need to remember that Jesus is our high priest. We do not offer our own worship to God apart from the high priesthood of Jesus Christ. God does not sniff at our puny attempts to sing from our hearts; he beholds the perfect high priestly ministry of Jesus Christ with great delight, a ministry which encompasses all of our imperfect responses to God. Gladly, we need not, indeed should not, take ourselves so seriously. Our fragile worship, sometimes passionate yet often stale, is subsumed by, included in and ultimately offered by Jesus Christ himself.<sup>vi</sup>

When we really ponder this, don’t the debates about high/low, liturgical/free, or old/new just fade away? And this is my main exhortation to all of us – cling to Jesus as your great worshipper! You need Him no matter what kind of church you are worshipping in. This has rescued me from cold criticism time and time again. Instead of setting myself up as the arbiter of what true worship should be like (and in the midst of a worship service mind you) if I imagine Jesus among us – or standing next to me – my pride melts and I see myself as much in need of the righteousness of Jesus as the person next to me. This is exactly what C.S. Lewis meant when he found himself critical of worship songs:

I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren’t fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit.<sup>vii</sup>

## **Closing Exhortation**

So church, as one who is tasked with overseeing our worship services, I desperately need your help. I need your input, your ideas, and your participation ... even if you don’t agree with all of our service choices. I need your patience when I don’t seem to listen to your criticisms or ideas and your perseverance to keep trying. I need your prayer for a servant heart in the midst of a culture of worship that is more concerned with artistic platform than edification. I need you to sing your heart out and

to sing with understanding! I need you to pray for our gatherings. I need you to remember the covering work of Jesus on those mornings when everything just seems cold and “off!” I need you to overcome your fears and open your hearts to one another. I need you to winsomely speak of the benefits of Christ-centered participation to those in other churches without self-righteously criticizing. And of course it’s not really *me* that needs this but all of us. We’re a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, so let’s act like one and be determined to build up the church by actively participating in whatever ways we can. We have the love and acceptance of God through Jesus, so let’s stand secure and offer that love and acceptance to all.

– Closing Prayer –

## **The Lord’s Supper**

– Call servers forward for the Lord’s supper –

I’m so glad that we get to celebrate the Lord’s supper today after the sermon. Remember that this was one of the things that the reformers restored to worship. While they differed slightly in the details of their theology, they all wanted it accessible to the people and wanted it practiced more often. You have received the living Jesus through an encounter with His Word, and now you will receive the living Jesus by partaking of Him in this holy meal.

Listen to how the Apostle Paul introduced this meal in 1 Corinthians 11:

I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

The table is for all baptized Christians who are joined to His church. For everyone else, God invites you to His feast simply through faith. Why not surrender your life to Jesus right now during the meal so that next time you can participate?

– Distribute elements –

Because of the emphasis this week on our call to serve one another as priests, I’d like to ask you to do something different – I want you to serve the meal to someone else.

Find a partner who has the elements. Before serving them the bread, say, “the body of Christ, given for you.” Before serving them to fruit of the vine, say, “the blood of Christ, shed for you.” It might be a little awkward but that’s actually a good picture of the messiness of real life!

– Closing song –

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<sup>i</sup> “Priesthood of Believers,” Peter J. Leithart: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2010/10/priesthood-of-believers>

<sup>ii</sup> “The Priesthood of All Believers,” Timothy George (quoting Paul Althaus) : <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/10/the-priesthood-of-all-believers>

<sup>iii</sup> “Desiring God,” John Piper

<sup>iv</sup> “The Priesthood of All Believers,” Timothy George (quoting Winthrop S. Hudson) : <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/10/the-priesthood-of-all-believers>

<sup>v</sup> “Why men have stopped singing in church,” David Murrow: <http://churchformen.com/why-men-have-stopped-singing-in-church/>

<sup>vi</sup> “Our Great High Priest,” Chris Tilling: <https://www.worshipcentral.org/life/article/our-great-high-priest-chris-tilling>

<sup>vii</sup> “God in the Dock,” C.S. Lewis: <http://andynaselli.com/c-s-lewis-on-his-churchs-hymns-fifth-rate-poems-set-to-sixth-rate-music>