

TALKING POINT #6
BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES #4: PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

WHO DOES THE MINISTRY?

“Ministry” is a great old Church word that simply means “service.” We have Ministers of Religion as well as Government Ministers. In each case, they are servants – one of religion and the other of the Crown. My favourite way to remember the true meaning of ministry is the story behind minestrone soup. Italian monks made the soup for poor people and travellers to sustain them, so it was through this that the monks served (or “ministered”) to people - the same Latin word for service lies behind both ministry and minestrone.

Any ministry needs an object – we must serve someone. So, in Christian ministry, who do we serve? In one sense, we serve God – that’s particularly what is in mind in the Old Testament sacrificial and priestly system. However, the second limb of priestly service is to serve other people. In any case, let’s start by affirming the great privilege that is ministry – to serve Almighty God and His cherished people! So, why do we make a point of this “Priesthood of All Believers”?

WE’RE ALL A PRODUCT OF OUR PAST

If you’ve come from another denomination, particularly Roman Catholic, Orthodox or Anglican, one of the first things you’ll notice is that we don’t have any “priests.” This is not just a change of name – it’s not just that what Catholics call Priests we call Pastors. Rather, this has been a deliberate choice in history.

During the English Reformation of the 17th Century, the early Baptists identified the hypocrisy and corruption of the Established Church of the time. In particular, they rejected the authority vested in the clergy (the bishops and priests) because they claimed to have complete and unquestioned autonomy to direct the affairs of the Church and as the bridge between God and His people. It was particularly this role of the priest standing between people and God that the Baptists could not accept.

Rather, they pointed to New Testament passages that showed the priestly role of the Old Testament fulfilled in Christ such that all believers have unfettered access to their Heavenly Father, through the blood of Jesus. As a result, ministry (both in the sense of serving God and serving His people) is open to all believers and not limited to the clergy. Additionally, it means that all believers are a “royal priesthood” who can approach God through our great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14). We don’t need a priest to take our confession or absolve us from our sins. We don’t need a priest to discern God’s Word on our behalf or give his binding interpretation. We don’t need anyone to stand on our behalf before God or on God’s behalf to us. Through the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ, we have access to God and to His ministry.

That doesn’t mean ministry has been demolished, just redefined. There is still the duty of humanity to serve God in worship, obedience and self-sacrifice and God chooses to bless people through people – both outreach to those outside the family of God and acts of edification to those inside the family of God. God still uses people to bless His people! This is ministry and you have an important part in it – WOW!

BUT IS IT BIBLICAL?

Clearly, the concept of ministry develops through Scripture. Over the course of the Old Testament, God’s ministry to His people was effectively divided into three offices – prophet, priest and king. Prophets brought specific revelation from God to His people; Priests were mediators of God’s covenant; Kings ruled by executing God’s laws. When these offices functioned well, Israel walked in God’s ways. However, the history of Israel shows that people in these offices did not do their role well. A perfect prophet, priest and king was needed!

And that’s who came in the person of Jesus Christ. Through His life, death, resurrection and Heavenly ministry, Jesus is the perfect prophet by fulfilling completely God’s revelation to us (Hebrews 1:1), the perfect priest in that He has made complete atonement for our sins and opened the way to God (Hebrews 9:12), and the perfect King ruling from Heaven and who will one day bring all things under His rule (Philippians 2:10-12).

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Understanding that Jesus has done all this, the role for humanity has changed. Romans 12:1 tells us that self-sacrificial service of God is our “reasonable act of service” (or ministry) because it is a natural response to Christ’s grace as the great Prophet, Priest and King. Additionally, Peter rejoices in the fact that we are a “royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” that we may declare God’s praises (1 Peter 2:9). In other words, just as the priests of the Old Testament told people of God, so are we to do the same.

Ministry, then, is service of God and others. It is done both by praising God, declaring His Name and building up His body, the Church. That is why Ephesians 4:12-13 says gifts were given “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

It is clear that the Bible teaches the Priesthood of All Believers. The Cross has torn down the barrier between God and people, so that we have direct access in serving God and each other.

SO, ARE THERE CONDITIONS FOR WHO DOES WHAT?

Does this mean then that everyone may participate in any and every ministry in the Church? Does it mean that no one can be precluded from particular ministries? A classic example of this in many Churches in the past has been music ministry? Does anyone have the right to take part in the music ministry of the Church, irrespective of their ability, if that’s the ministry to which they believe they’re called?

On one hand the answer is ‘yes’. Any ministry is open to any person. However, the answer is also ‘no’ because not everyone is suited to every ministry. That is the beauty of the way God has designed the body. There are different limbs and different ministries, some more public and others more behind-the-scenes, some paid and some voluntary. The key is to find to which ministry you are called and one of the best ways to do this is to listen to Church leaders. No ministry is more important or valuable than another and no person is more important than another. If we’re not suited for a particular ministry, it is not an insult to us, it just means God has a different role for us in His body. Everyone contributes to the health and growth of the body.

So, there will be conditions for what ministries people can do. Sometimes, these will be legal conditions that we are required to follow. Sometimes people will simply not be gifted for a certain role. In that case, the leaders’ job is to help people find the role that suits their gifting and ability most. Ministry, then, is unconditional in the sense that everyone has a part to play but not everyone will do every ministry – God has taken far too much care ordering His Church for that sort of chaotic situation.

IMPLICATIONS

This means that at Forest Lake Baptist we value every-member ministry. Every person is valuable to God as His child and every person has a role in His body as one of His ministers. Though I have given my life to vocational “Ministry,” I am no more important than anyone else in the body – I just have a different role. Granted, it is a role that carries certain authority and responsibility for teaching the Word and leading the Congregation but it does not make me any more valuable than anyone else. You have a role at Forest Lake Baptist – what is it? Talk to the Ministry Council and let us help you find your role in the body!

CONCLUSION

In Christ, we have the privilege to serve God and His people. Enjoy your part – you are important to God!

FURTHER TALKING POINT TOPICS

Next month, we’ll look at our final Baptist distinctive – Separation of Church and State (Liberty of Conscience).