

THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE BELIEVER IN BAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of the doctrinal achievements that resulted from the Reformation, one might not think of the priesthood of the believer. Justification was not the only doctrine Luther and the other Reformers rediscovered. When the Reformers evaluated their Roman counterpart's ecclesiological structures, they discovered several blunders. One of those blunders was expressed in terms of priesthood. In fact, according to Timothy George, "Luther's greatest contribution to Protestant ecclesiology was his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers."¹

Renouncing man's need for a Catholic priest to access God, the Reformers saw in Scripture a glorious truth that forever altered their understanding of believer's access.² As a result, the priesthood of believers has remained a precious doctrine to Christians because of its founding in Scripture, and the freedom all believers have in accessing God through His word and prayer. While this doctrine remains precious to believers of different denominational stripes, Baptist ecclesiology has been undergirded by this doctrine and its multiple implications.

Several components within Baptist ecclesiology help distinguish Baptists from

¹Timothy George, *The Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1988), 95.

²According to Roger Olson, the unifying beliefs of all Protestant Reformers were Salvation by grace through faith, Scripture alone, and the priesthood of all believers. Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP), 370.

other Christian and non-Christian denominations. The Baptist understanding of the priesthood of all Believers does, in fact, provide one example of a Baptist distinctive.³ While analyzing Baptist roots, Curtis Freeman, James McClendon, and C. Rosalee Ewell determined: “In the Baptist understanding of the church, all believers are priests and so may pray for others, comfort the afflicted, or proclaim the gospel.”⁴ Baptists are not the only Christians who affirm this doctrine, but Baptists believe its implications reach far beyond a mere blessing received in salvation. For Baptists, this doctrine undergirds much of the ecclesiological practices in Baptist life.

Because this doctrine remains a key aspect of Baptist ecclesiology, this paper examines the biblical foundations of this doctrine, analyzes Edgar Y. Mullins’s contributions to the overall Baptist interpretation, notes the implications for Baptist ecclesiology, investigates recent controversies this doctrine has presented in Southern Baptist life, and questions the individualistic/community debate regarding priesthood.

BIBLICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Generally, four New Testament verses are used in defense of the priesthood of all believers: 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10.⁵ These verses express the legitimacy of

³R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just A Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 45.

⁴Curtis W. Freeman, James Wm. McClendon Jr., and C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell, *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1999), 8.

⁵While these four verses are the major biblical references used in defense of the priesthood of all believers from the New Testament, other verses are used less frequently: Hebrews 10:19,22; 13:16; and Romans 12:1.

this doctrine and God's purpose in establishing believer priests. However, to grasp the New Testament depiction one must understand the Old Testament background.

Reggie McNeal argued Exodus 19:3-6 provides the clearest example of the Old Testament background.⁶ Of particular reference was Exodus 19:6a, "and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."⁷ For McNeal, the Old Testament background was supplied in how God designated Israel as a kingdom of priests among all other peoples. The background was displayed in three specific ways: One, the priestly privileges extended to the whole community. Two, the priestly responsibilities rested on each member. Three, "Israel's mission under Yahweh's kingship was priestly in character, especially in relation to non-Israelites."⁸ These characteristics supplied the New Testaments obligations for believers under the New Covenant. John MacArthur, however, found much more Old Testament evidence.

MacArthur recognized six Old Testament characteristics of priesthood from three passages that were supplied in the New Testament doctrine.⁹ One, in the Old Testament God sovereignly chose the priests. In the New Testament, God sovereignly chooses His believers. Two, in the Old Testament God cleansed the priests from sin before they embarked on their duties. In the New Testament Jesus cleanses believers through the

⁶ Reggie McNeal, "The Priesthood of All Believers," in *Has our Theology Changed?: Southern Baptist Thought Since 1845*, ed. Paul A. Basden (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 205.

⁷All Scripture references are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

⁸McNeal, "The Priesthood of All Believers," 205.

⁹John MacArthur, *1 Peter* (Chicago: Moody, 2004), 108-113. MacArthur's Old Testament references were Exodus 28-29, Leviticus 8-9, and Malachi 2.

washing of regeneration. Three, God clothed the priests for service with specific garments in the Old Testament. In the New Testament God clothes believers with righteousness. Four, through Moses God anointed the Levitical priests for service. Similarly, in the New Testament God gives believers a divine anointing through the Holy Spirit. Five, God prepared the priesthood for service. In the New Testament, believers too must be prepared for service. Six, in the Old Testament God called the priests to obedience. Similarly, throughout the New Testament believers are called on to live as obedient children. MacArthur's six references reveal the similarities that exist between the Old and New Testament models. However, the New Testament references provide unambiguous evidence as the privilege and responsibility of believer priests.

The New Testament references depict the privilege and responsibility that exists for believer priests. The privilege centers on access to God. Every believer has the privilege of direct fellowship with God through the mediating work of Christ. Through Christ's high priestly work, believers can directly access God without the aid of any earthly person or entity. All believers share this privilege equally. Privilege, however, brings responsibility.

In both 1 Peter passages the priestly responsibilities are given. In 1 Peter 2:5 the priestly responsibility includes offering up "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Similarly, 1 Peter 2:9 includes the priestly responsibility of proclaiming "the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." In both verses believers are called to service. Believers who comprise local churches are to collectively adhere to these responsibilities through all phases of corporate worship. Similarly, an individual believer is required to demonstrate his/her priestly function at all times. Whether in Sunday School or on the golf course the priestly duties remain.

EDGAR Y. MULLINS

Among Southern Baptists, Edgar Y. Mullins's contributions to the priesthood doctrine are worthy of analysis.¹⁰ Mullins's articulation of the priesthood of believers is referenced often to grasp a Baptist understanding on the issue. However, in order to appreciate his contribution to the priesthood of believers, one must grasp Mullins's understanding of the soul's competency in religion.

For Mullins, the individual's soul competency is a Baptist distinctive. Mullins argued, one can "recognize without difficulty that this [the soul's competency] is a distinguishing mark of the Baptists."¹¹ Mullins contrasted the Baptist view against Catholicism and other Protestant faiths in order to determine the unique aspects of this Baptist distinctive. Mullins spared little with his protest against Catholicism's abuse of this principle: Roman Catholicism

is inconsistent with the Christianity of Christ. If there is any one thing that stands out above others in crystal clearness in the New Testament it is Christ's doctrine of the soul's capacity, right, and privilege to approach God directly and transact

¹⁰E.Y. Mullins was born in Franklin County, Mississippi in 1860. The son of a Baptist minister, Mullins followed in the footsteps of his father and served several churches throughout the convention. In 1899, Mullins became the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and held that position until his death in 1928.

¹¹E.Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908), 59. Fisher Humphreys noted that this work "articulated for thoughtful readers the hidden assumptions underlying Baptist life." Fisher Humphreys, "Edgar Young Mullins," in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, eds. Timothy George and David Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 188.

with him in religion.¹²

Mullins's main argument against Catholicism centered on the unbiblical roles of the Catholic Priest and the equally unbiblical sacramental practices. For Mullins, these practices rule out the soul's competency because it exists only so far as the Catholic church allows.

In addition to Catholicism, Mullins believed many Protestant denominations deny the soul's competency. However, their denial is less obvious as Catholicism and lies in their inconsistencies. For Mullins, any church that practices infant baptism or episcopacy falls short of the biblical model. Mullins argued, "These bodies [those who practice infant baptism and/or episcopacy in any form] in fact represent a dualistic Christianity."¹³ Mullins believed the above practices all but dismiss soul competency.

How do these practices ignore soul competency? According to Mullins, a Presbyterian church allows members in two ways: One, a baptized infant is included in the membership based on the strength of that baptism and the parents' status. Second, any individual who has not been baptized makes a profession of faith relating their experience of being justified by faith. The individual is received, baptized, and given membership in a church. Mullins argued that these two actions represent an obvious contradiction. In one case a church member was admitted on the basis of another (an infant on the strength of the parents), and on the other hand, a church member was admitted on the basis of genuine salvation. For Mullins, this contradiction denies soul competency to one and allows it for another.

¹²Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 62-3.

¹³*Ibid.*, 63.

Baptists, according to Mullins, do not deny soul competency as Catholicism does, nor does it contradict itself like many Protestant denominations. Rather, Baptists have maintained that every individual possesses the right of direct access to God. Each individual was created in God's image and possesses the "inalienable right" to do business with Him. The results of the Fall, however, have crippled man's ability to seek God. Without grace, no one would ever seek or desire to commune with God. When and if grace does appear, the individual has the right to respond.

In addition, soul competency fuels evangelism and missions. Because man has the right to do business with God, Christians can confidently evangelize. Anytime an individual comes to Christ through the personal witness of a believer, soul competency is displayed. That individual did not have to jump through any hoops to respond to God.

According to Mullins, the priesthood of the believer implies soul competency.

The distinction between these two aspects are vital. As Timothy George argued,

Soul Competency pertains universally to all persons, not merely to Christians. Baptists, however, do not teach the 'priesthood of all human beings.' Priesthood applies only to those who, through repentance and faith, have been admitted into the covenant of grace and, consequently, have been made participants in the priestly ministry of their Mediator, Jesus Christ, i.e., to believers only.¹⁴

Indeed Mullins maintained the sharp distinction between soul competency and the priesthood of the believer. All individuals retain soul competency, but not all are believer priests.

Mullins referred to the priesthood of the believer as the "Religious Axiom" and maintained that all believers "have equal access to the Father's table, the Father's ear, and

¹⁴Timothy George, "The Priesthood of All Believers and the Quest for Theological Integrity," *Criswell Theological Review* 3.2 (1989), 285.

the Father's heart."¹⁵ Building on what he called the Reformation's "social" doctrine, Mullins argued that churches are composed of priests fitted for service. In contrast, Catholicism restricted the priesthood to an exclusive group.

Mullins argued that this axiom contained several principles. Namely, the priesthood of the believer asserts individualism in religion. Believers have one mediator, Christ, and through Him alone can believers access God. According to Mullins, non-Baptists deny this principle in whole or in part. Such a denial leads to religious tyranny. Every believer must relish the fellowship experienced as a believer priest.

ECCLESIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The implications of the priesthood doctrine in Baptist ecclesiology centers around congregational government. When defending congregationalism, Baptists have numerous biblical, historical, and practical examples to give credence to this form of governance. Biblical defenses of congregationalism are plentiful, and the priesthood of all believers doctrine provides weighty strengths. This doctrine remains crucial to a biblical congregation operating in the Holy Spirit's power. As believer priests, Baptists can effectively meet the needs of local congregations.

As John Hammett noted, regenerate church membership, another hallmark of Baptist ecclesiology, remains closely linked with the priesthood of all believers.¹⁶ Baptist churches have maintained the relationship between priesthood and regenerate

¹⁵Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 92.

¹⁶John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 100-1.

church membership as the credentials for member participation. Because church membership consists of a group of believers who have been given a new spiritual disposition through regeneration and because of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work, believer priests have the responsibility to seek God's direction for the local assemblies.

Baptists, therefore, have taken the logical step with the priesthood of all believers doctrine. Through congregational church governance, Baptists allow the doctrine to take shape within the membership. Millard Erickson, a noted Baptist theologian, argued that congregational government best exemplifies the biblical model because it "takes seriously the principle of the priesthood and spiritual competency of all believers."¹⁷ Baptists, therefore, can argue for congregationalism from several angles, and this doctrine certainly provides added ammunition. When Baptists practice congregationalism they are in effect affirming that God works through His believer priests to accomplish His purposes.

In addition to God working through His believer priests, this doctrine also ensures that God's people can understand God's Word. As Gerald Cowan noted, Baptist churches practicing congregationalism believe that each believer priest has the ability to understand God's Word because all have the Holy Spirit working within them.¹⁸ As a result, the Holy Spirit's illuminating work assists believers in biblical interpretation. In addition, the doctrine necessitates ministry.

Mark Dever, a Southern Baptist pastor in Washington, D.C. argued that the

¹⁷Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1096.

¹⁸Gerald Cowan, "Congregationalism and Its Limits," *Theology for Ministry* 1 (November 2006): 12-13.

priesthood of all believers necessitates “every-member ministry.”¹⁹ However, Dever loathed contemporary models of “every-member” ministry. For Dever, many have misunderstood every member ministry with regard to pastoral authority. In other words, in the name of the priesthood of the believer, many believers have diminished the pastoral function and role by placing it on an equal plain as lay ministry. This idea does not adequately represent every member ministry as dictated in Scripture.

According to Dever, the biblical model of every-member ministry must remain intact, but not at the expense of the God ordained offices of the pastor, bishop, or elder. The biblical model of every-member ministry fully appreciates the responsibilities of the pastorate. In addition, every-member ministry alleviates much of the baggage that arrests many contemporary ministers. Believers are endowed with different gifts and are capable of serving the local church through versatile means, but this service does not diminish the pastoral role, but supports it.

Baptists have insisted that the priesthood of all believers, among other doctrines, supports congregational government. In addition, Baptists believe that this doctrine allows each member to interpret Scripture through the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Baptists believe this doctrine facilitates believers in their ministry in the local church. Those benefits notwithstanding, Baptists also recognize one final contribution this doctrine provides for congregational government. This doctrine also assists the church through exposing errors. When believers fall into error other believers, through the Holy Spirit’s work, can assist in bringing believers back into obedience. In a

¹⁹Mark Dever, “The Priesthood of All Believers: Rediscovering Every-Member Ministry,” in *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 111.

corporate sense, this doctrine helps churches stray from theological error. If anyone member of a local church corrupts a church through heretical teaching believers have the spiritual impetus to counteract those efforts. As priests, believers are to be on guard against anything that would disrupt the fellowship.

SBC CONTROVERSIES

In the 1963 Baptist Faith & Message, Southern Baptists affirmed the following statement regarding priesthood:

Baptists emphasize the soul's competency before God, freedom in religion, and the priesthood of the believer. However, this emphasis should not be interpreted to mean that there is an absence of certain definite doctrines that Baptists believe, cherish, and with which they have been and are now closely identified.²⁰

The above statement affirmed the belief in the priesthood of believers, but it also confines the extent of priestly functions. In other words, the belief in the priesthood of believers does not give license for any one believer or group of believers to believe anything under the sun. Rather, it affirmed "definite doctrines" which Baptists cherish. Furthermore, the idea of being "closely identified" presumes a level of consistency on major doctrines.

While Baptists have considered the priesthood of the believer to be an integral aspect of Baptist beliefs, the following resolution at the 1988 Southern Baptist Convention gives evidence of neglect to this doctrine and highlights the controversy that has resulted:

WHEREAS, None of the five major writing systematic theologians in Southern Baptist history have given more than passing reference to the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer in their systematic theologies; and WHEREAS, The Baptist Faith and Message preamble refers to the priesthood of the believer, but

²⁰*The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1963), 6.

provides no definition or content to the term; and WHEREAS, The high profile emphasis on the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer in Southern Baptist life is a recent historical development; and WHEREAS, The priesthood of the believer is a term which is subject to both misunderstanding and abuse; and WHEREAS, The doctrine of the priesthood of the believer has been used to justify wrongly the attitude that a Christian may believe whatever he so chooses and still be considered a loyal Southern Baptist; and WHEREAS, The doctrine of the priesthood of the believer can be used to justify the undermining of pastoral authority in the local church. Be it therefore RESOLVED, That the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in San Antonio, Texas, June 14-16, 1988, affirm its belief in the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of the believer (1 Peter 2:9 and Revelation 1:6); and Be it further RESOLVED, That we affirm that this doctrine in no way gives license to misinterpret, explain away, demythologize, or extrapolate out elements of the supernatural from the Bible; and Be it further RESOLVED, That the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer in no way contradicts the biblical understanding of the role, responsibility, and authority of the pastor which is seen in the command to the local church in Hebrews 13:17, "Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account;" and Be finally RESOLVED, That we affirm the truth that elders, or pastors, are called of God to lead the local church (Acts 20:28).²¹

The events surrounding the resolution must be grasped in order to understand the controversy in the resolution on priesthood.

The 1988 Southern Baptist Convention drew 32,727 messengers to San Antonio, TX.²² At the pastor's conference W.A. Criswell preached his famous "skunk" sermon. In his sermon Criswell grouped liberals and moderates together and stated, "A skunk by any other name still stinks." In addition to that comment, Criswell stated, "We have taken the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer and made it to cover every damnable heresy you can imagine." Criswell's comments only give a partial indication to the division among the messengers. For example, messengers elected Jerry Vines as convention

²¹Walter B. Shurden and Randy Shepley, *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War* (Macon, GA: Mercer Press, 1996), 237.

²²Ibid., 233. The summary of the 1988 Southern Baptist Convention, unless otherwise noted, is developed from *Going for te Jugular*, 233-7.

president over moderate Richard Jackson by 50.53% to 48.32%. The obvious tension displayed in the convention manifested itself during the resolution on the priesthood of the believer.

The resolution itself caused tremendous controversy among moderate Southern Baptists. According to Nancy Ammerman, the moderates saw the resolution “as an indirect condemnation of Convention programs on lay leadership, but it was also seen as a forthright statement of the fundamentalists’ belief that pastors really to ‘rule’ their local churches.”²³ The resolution was adopted by 54.75% to 45.25%.²⁴ The moderates did not succeed in defeating the priesthood resolution as hoped. Defeat, however, did not diminish the moderates expression of discontent. According to Ammerman, the moderates responded:

The afternoon after it was passed a group marched from the convention center to the Alamo, singing, ‘We Shall Overcome.’ They saw the morning’s resolution as an endorsement of patriarchal pastoral dominance no less oppressive than slavery or the segregation many of them had helped to protest two decades before. When they reached the Alamo, they symbolically tore their copies of the resolution to bits, while singing Martin Luther’s Reformation Hymn, ‘A Mighty Fortress is Our God.’ They could hardly believe that a Baptist body had just chosen to interpret ‘priesthood of the believer’ to mean obeying the pastor. Such a view seemed to the moderates to fly in the face on one of Baptists’ most cherished principles.²⁵

Clearly, controversy surrounded the priesthood doctrine in Southern Baptist life. Over 32,000 messengers, almost equally divided, debated the merits of the priesthood of the believer. In addition, as a result of the convention’s controversy on the priesthood

²³Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 88.

²⁴Shurden and Shepley, *Going for the Jugular*, 233.

²⁵Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 88-9.

doctrine, twelve state conventions ratified resolutions on the priesthood of the believer. In all, twenty-four state conventions dealt with the matter.²⁶

Unfortunately, the resolution gives poor evidence of the proper understanding of the priesthood doctrine. The above statement acknowledged what the priesthood of believers does not mean rather than what it does mean. Throughout the resolution, different controversies were attributed to the misunderstanding of the priesthood of believers. The controversies present elements where Baptist failed both locally and as a denominational whole.

Three elements in the resolution must be critiqued: One, the overall neglect of pastors to teach properly this doctrine; two, the neglect of the Southern Baptist Convention of establishing a proper understanding of this doctrine in the Baptist Faith and Message; and three, the biblical purpose of the priesthood.

Pastors cannot take full responsibility for the neglect of this doctrine among their flock (to do so would be a denial of the doctrine). Nevertheless, pastors deserve much criticism for the apparent absence of a proper understanding of priesthood among Baptists. The resolution makes a number of statements that give evidence to pastoral neglect. For example, when one uses this doctrine “to believe whatsoever he chooses” then pastors are at least partially responsible. No Christian, no Baptist, has the right to believe whatever one wishes. The Bible restrains what any believer may believe and hold dearly. Furthermore, if this doctrine has been used to undermine the “role, responsibility, and authority” of pastors then pastors, in addition to not understanding this doctrine, do

²⁶Grady C. Cothen, *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention?* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993), 247.

not understand the pastoral role.

The resolution admitted that Southern Baptists have never articulated the essence of this doctrine. According to the resolution, five major Southern Baptist theologians and the Convention as a whole have only given this doctrine lip service. Furthermore, the resolution admitted that the Baptist Faith and Message only mentions the doctrine, but never defines it throughout. To the Convention's shame, the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message failed again to define exactly what Southern Baptists affirm as a biblical doctrine. No wonder authority is circumvented in the churches, no wonder pastors do not clarify, and no wonder believers twist and turn Scripture into their own meanings under the banner of their priesthood.

The above resolution affirmed the Southern Baptist belief in the priesthood of the believer. However, the resolution never stated the biblical purpose that gives the doctrine its importance in Baptist life. All one gathers from the resolution is what the priesthood of the believer does not mean. The resolution could have easily mentioned the fallacious understandings and then briefly explained why Baptists affirm this doctrine. The controversy that surrounds this doctrine is a result of neglect. If more Southern Baptists understood the biblical doctrine, less confusion would have occurred.

While the 1988 resolution did not define the priesthood of believers, the conventions website does offer a better analysis. The website has a link of "position statements" that are intended to clarify the "tension" regarding certain subjects. With regard to priesthood, the website affirmed:

We affirm the priesthood of all believers. Laypersons have the same right as ordained ministers to communicate with God, interpret Scripture, and minister in Christ's name. That is why the Convention requires strong lay involvement on its boards. This doctrine is first and foremost a matter of responsibility and servanthood, not privilege and license. It is of course, a perversion of this doctrine

to say that all views are equally valid, that you can believe anything and still be a Baptist or that the pastor has no unique leadership role.²⁷

The position statement, much like the 1988 resolution, does indicate what the doctrine does not mean: all views are equally valid, and perverted views of pastoral leadership. However, this position statement is more precise with the essence of the doctrine. One must wonder why Southern Baptists have not given a full treatment of this doctrine in the Baptist Faith and Message.

SINGULAR OR PLURAL?

Is it better to speak of the priesthood of “the believer” or of “all believers?”

Perhaps many would wonder what relevancy exists in that question. However, as Hammett noted, “In recent Baptist life, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has sometimes become the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer (singular), and has been misinterpreted in terms of individual rights and confused with the idea of soul competence.”²⁸ As noted with Mullins, soul competency recognizes the responsibility all persons have for their relationship with God. Every individual can do business with God without the aid of any human priest. While Hammett regarded the singular/plural distinction to individual rights, Timothy George argues from a historical base,

According to George, the Reformation principle stressed the priesthood of all believers. George noted, “For them [the Reformers] it was never a question of a lonely, isolated seeker of truth, but rather of a band of faithful believers united in a common

²⁷The Southern Baptist Convention, “Priesthood,” Position Statements, <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/pspriesthood.asp> (accessed November 9, 2007).

²⁸Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 46.

confession as a local, visible *congregatio sanctorum*.”²⁹ George loathed the tendencies of Baptists to restrain priesthood as an individualistic biblical doctrine. Can one individual makeup a priesthood? Arguing from history, George advocated the priesthood of all believers as a call to ministry and service of all believers. The individualistic nature is assumed, but the greater emphasis, for George, must be all believers.

Must one distinguish between the singular and plural forms? George was correct in demonstrating the Reformers emphasis on the priesthood of all believers.³⁰ However, one can affirm the singular form without denying the plural form. When emphasizing the singular form (of the believer) the emphasis remains on the individualistic nature of one believer to God. The individual remains responsible for direct fellowship with God without a human mediator. Similarly, the believer remains responsible for his/her actions, personal Bible reading, and prayer. Without question, the singular form of this doctrine proves legitimate, and its legitimacy does not discredit the plural form.

When emphasizing the priesthood of all believers the emphasis no longer pertains to the individualistic nature as described above, but to the local body. As believers all who belong to Christ are priestly brothers and sisters. The emphasis, of course, centers on the fellowship and community that exists within local assemblies and in the universal family of God. In the preamble of the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message it emphasizes the priesthood of believers. One cannot argue, however, that the committee responsible for the revision denied the singular aspect of this doctrine. While individual believers can affirm their own priesthood, the same could be said for the body of believers comprising

²⁹George, “The Priesthood of All Believers and the Quest for Theological Integrity,” 291.

³⁰George argued from Luther and Calvin regarding the priesthood of all believers.

the priesthood of all believers.

CONCLUSION

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers serves as a vital aspect of Evangelical theology. Thankfully, the Reformers recognized the unbiblical models that existed in their day and sought to teach the important truths found in this doctrine. As a result, believers throughout various denominations are aware of their right to deal personally with God. More importantly, the Bible provides ample evidence as to the meaning and purpose of the priesthood doctrine.

Historically, Baptists have affirmed the biblical understanding of the priesthood of all believers as well. Yet, for Baptists, this doctrine meant far more than the absence of a Roman priest. This doctrine gave clear implications toward the overall Baptist ecclesiology. Edgar Mullins was one of a number of Baptists that sought to teach Baptists this doctrine's importance and meaning. His analysis crystalizes long held Baptist views regarding soul competency and the priesthood of the believer. However, in Baptist life this doctrine has proven controversial. Perhaps if the doctrine were no longer assumed as understood, pastors would fail to neglect it from the pulpit.

Additionally, the priesthood doctrine provides numerous implications for Baptist ecclesiology. Because of the traditional belief in a regenerate church membership, Baptists have understood that each member possesses priestly status. Therefore, all priests participate in the responsibilities of corporate and individual expressions. The priesthood of all believers must remain a distinctive among Baptists. If neglect continues one cannot be surprised at the absurd responses others will make when the doctrine is affirmed.