

# drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 08, 2006

## The Priesthood of Each Believer vs. The Priesthood of All Believers

I have repeatedly heard people appeal to Luther's "Priesthood of All Believers" as a justification for do-it-yourself spirituality. "I am my own priest; I don't need organized religion to have access to God." In the wake of such appeals, many have come to blame the Reformation for the insidious individualism of American religion.

But what did Luther really mean when he declared the "Priesthood of All Believers"? Can "churchless Christianity" be the outworking of the Reformation? Are [Luther](#) and [Barna](#) just peas in a pod?

This confused protestant legacy can be traced to (among other things) a fundamental misunderstanding in the meaning of the Priesthood of All Believers. In order to expose the counterfeit, let's make sure we have grasped the original:

The Priesthood of All Believers begins with an attack on a roped-off priestly class who alone can procure access to Christ and his saving benefits. The crucial appeal is to the Priesthood of Christ. Christ alone is our priest who offers access to God's grace. Only on the basis of his sole priesthood is our priesthood established. We too are priests, because everything Christ has is ours through the blessed exchange of justifying faith. Thus we are priests as Christ was priest.

So far so good. But here is where the mistake emerges. It is so easy to slip into thinking that we have access to God as Christ had access to God. The priesthood of Christ ends with our priesthood for ourselves. Hence you have the erroneous notion of the Priesthood of *Each* Believer: every Christian his or her own priest.

But the principle is not that we procure access to God for ourselves through Christ, but rather that we are priests for one another as Christ is for us. This is the logic of the "as": *as* Christ was a priest for others, so I am a priest for others. On the basis of the priesthood of

## About Me



Name:  
JohnLDrury  
Location:  
Doylestown,  
Pennsylvania, US

[View my complete profile](#)

## blogs

- [keith drury](#)
- [ken schenck](#)
- [amanda drury](#)
- [sam bills](#)
- [david drury](#)
- [millinerd](#)
- [chris bounds](#)
- [generous orthodoxy](#)
- [alien corpse](#)
- [wesleyan boomerangs](#)
- [bible forum](#)
- [kevin wright](#)
- [paul matthew](#)
- [common grounds](#)
- [theofragen](#)
- [harbinger](#)
- [tim](#)
- [ericnentrup](#)
- [one-life](#)
- [jon dodrill](#)
- [scott collins-jones](#)
- [andrea summers](#)
- [christin taylor](#)
- [paul kind](#)
- [cowpi](#)
- [feminary](#)
- [eric herron](#)

Christ, all those who believe in him become priests for their family, friends, neighbors, and enemies. As Christ suffers for others, so we suffer for others. As Christ offers forgiveness, so we offer forgiveness to others. As Christ is our access point to God, so we become others' access point to Christ.

So the Priesthood of All Believers does not imply do-it-yourself Christianity. Rather, we are empowered by Christ's priesthood to be priests for one another. Thus the Church is the community of priests, continually offering Christ to one another. And the Priesthood of All Believers is an unmistakably communal activity.

### Any thoughts?

Does this rendering of the Priesthood of All Believers ring true to you?

Are there ways of avoiding the mistaken version, or is it inevitable?

How else might one think about the Priesthood of All Believers?

Is there some other way to defend Churchless Christianity other than on the basis of the Priesthood of All Believers?

Labels: [Christian Life](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 4:17 PM

[5 comments](#)

### 5 Comments:

At [8:01 PM, March 08, 2006](#), [Jake](#) said...

John,

I find it fascinating that you have heard folks vying for a pluralistic spirituality using Luther's corrective to the Catholic priestly monopoly. In my tradition, we make frequent reference to the priesthood of all believers, but in a far different way. When the church hitched its wagon to the corporate model, we entered into a new kind of priesthood whereby ministers were not priests but servants of the corporation. The congregants became overly-demanding shareholders and demanded a higher return on their dividends from their 'corporate officers.' The priesthood of all believers, now coupled with a missional thrust, within the Baptist tradition is a corrective to lay-apathy and lethargy. We are making our congregants aware of the duties encumbant upon every believer to be Christ's ambassadors to the world they indwell. So Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers is both a guard against rampant individualism and congregational hand-sitting. I find that interesting. Peace.

At [7:43 AM, March 09, 2006](#), [jul](#) said...

I think you have clearly laid out a more proper understanding of the

- [jeremy summers](#)
- [eternal dialogue](#)

### organizations

- [church folks for a better america](#)
- [princeton theological seminary](#)
- [somerst christian college](#)
- [indiana wesleyan university](#)
- [the wesleyan church](#)
- [emergent wesleyan](#)
- [doylestown united methodist](#)
- [spring lake wesleyan church](#)
- [citylife church](#)
- [college wesleyan church](#)
- [the well](#)
- [central jersey emergent cohort](#)
- [gospel and our culture network](#)
- [wesley center for applied theology](#)
- [wesleyan theological society](#)
- [american academy of religion](#)
- [catholic theological society of america](#)

### resources

- [theology dictionary](#)
- [island of freedom](#)
- [ccel](#)
- [augustine](#)
- [luther](#)
- [newman](#)
- [barth](#)
- [frei](#)
- [imdb](#)
- [lark](#)
- [games](#)
- [geeks](#)
- [news](#)
- [iwuonline](#)
- [blogger](#)
- [typepad](#)

### Previous Posts

[Book Review: "Barth for Armchair Theologians" by J...](#)

[Bruce Metzger Passes Away at 93](#)

["This generation shall not pass, till all these th...](#)

[The Ethics of God \(Bible Brain Rusters\)](#)

concept. It's interesting to note that the word 'preisthood' itself indicates a corporate sense, not an individualistic sense. And Hebrews is all about Christ being our high priest. Traditionally, the priests were a very large group of people, a whole tribe. The whole purpose of a priest was to serve God by serving God's people. A priest is a mediator, and you can't mediate for yourself. As believers, we all have the ministry of reconciliation, and have authority to mediate or be a channel of God's Spirit and grace to any person on earth. This is the essence of true fellowship--2 or more believers together imparting the Spirit to one another in various ways (prayer, encouragement, sharing revelations from Scripture...) Meeting together is commanded in Scripture, and it doesn't make sense when people try to make a case against it. How can the hand or eye or leg live separate from the rest of the body? The church is God's plan for ushering in his kingdom, and any true believer should want to be a part of that. It isn't wise or safe to distance yourself from the body of Christ.

At [11:42 AM, March 09, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

I completely agree with you from a New Testament perspective that none of the priesthood language in the New Testament was focused on us as individual priests. We also have varied NT imagery. In Hebrews Christ is the priest and high priest, although we offer sacrifices of praise (13:15) to God and sacrifices by doing good to others (13:16). In 1 Peter the holy priesthood seems focused on our corporate relationship to God, declaring His praises (2:9) and offering spiritual sacrifices through Christ (2:5; atonement related comment?). Then we offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God (Rom. 12:1), letting the flesh die so that our spirits can live to God (e.g., Rom. 8:10).

This has been a Schenck imposition on your blog...

At [12:58 PM, March 09, 2006](#), [wzph](#) said...

Amen. Last night was the last lecture in modern church history class at Fuller. This was a (minor) theme throughout. I think it's helpful. I have a hard time with pastors who want to "create authentic community." It seems contrived to me. However, the priesthood of all believers, as you have outlined it, seems to be the authenticest (sorry) of communities.

At [4:47 PM, March 11, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

I think you have Luther right. I hear this same misunderstanding of Luther--and read it as well--the priesthood of *each* believer... mostly

[Busters](#)

["The Father is Greater than I" \(Bible Brain Buster...](#)

[Even what is impossible with God is possible with ...](#)

[Suggestion Box: Bible Brain Busters](#)

[Bible Brain Busters: Gethsemane Prayer](#)

[Christmas Connections Preaching](#)

[Attributes of God \(XI\): Patience and Goodness](#)



from folk who have theologically exchanged the ephod for the iPod.

[Post a Comment](#)

[<< Home](#)