

**Good Reasons to Be Baptist:**  
***The Priesthood of Every Believer***  
Numbers 18:1-7; Matthew 27:50-51; I Timothy 2:3-7

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Today's good reason for being Baptist has been called our firstborn child. Sometimes it is referred to as "soul competency." Sometimes you will hear it called "soul freedom" or simply "individual freedom." The name by which most of us know this firstborn child of Baptists is "the priesthood of every Believer." The late Dr. Herschel Hobbs, chairman of the committee that revised the Baptist Faith and Message in 1963, wrote that it is "the distinctive contribution of Baptists to the Christian world." (*You Are Chosen: The Priesthood of All Believers*, p. 1) In 1986 Dr. Findley Edge, a longtime professor at Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY, a Baptist prophet in my opinion, opened his book on the doctrine of the laity by saying that this belief is "fundamental" to being Baptist (p. 9). Dr. James Dunn, the past Director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, wrote this, "This concept of soul freedom is the ultimate source of all modern notions of human rights. Quakers and Baptists as the radical sects of the Protestant Reformation advanced this view of religious freedom. Such freedom of conscience may be the oldest 'right of man'." (*Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*, p. 65).

They are each right. This good reason for being Baptist strikes at the very core of what it means to be Baptist. This is another place where our Baptist forefathers and mothers drove down a stake. Baptists believe in the priesthood of every single believer. That is, we believe in the God-given right and responsibility of every person to deal directly with God. Baptists believe that the relationship between God and the individual is not to be hindered by any creed or confession of faith, any denomination, any clergyperson, or any civil government. You have the right, the individual freedom, to determine what you believe about God and faith. You may be as liberal or as conservative as you are. In fact, you are free to believe nothing at all. But remember this. Only one person will be held responsible for what you believe, and that is you.

The priesthood of every believer runs through our other Baptist beliefs like a scarlet thread through a beautiful tapestry. For example, we claim to have no creeds except the Bible. We don't force theological uniformity on each other. Why? Because every individual *has the right to deal directly with God*. Last Sunday I talked about the need for personal experience in our faith. We withhold baptism until one is mature

enough to experience Christ personally. Why is this important? Because every individual has *the responsibility to deal directly with God*. It's your right, your freedom, to follow God wherever you honestly believe God is leading you. And only you are responsible for doing that.

I bet I know what some of you are thinking, "Well, I sure don't know many Baptists like that! Or anyone else for that matter. Most religious folks I know are trying to convince me that their beliefs are better than mine." Right? Well, I never said we do it perfectly. In fact, we are living in a time when we don't practice the priesthood of every believer very well.

To understand this good reason to be Baptist, we must understand the role of the priest in the Jewish community. The text from the book of Numbers describes the responsibility of the Jewish priests. Notice verse seven in particular:

*You and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for all that concerns **the altar** and that is within **the veil**; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood as a gift, and **any one else who comes near shall be put to death.***

The Jewish priests stood between God and the people. They were mediators. When the people had needs, the priests took the needs of the people to God. When God responded, the priests brought the response of God back to the people. In their religious system, the individual did not have the right or the responsibility to deal directly with God. The individual dealt with the priest and the priest dealt with God for the individual.

The basic functions of the priesthood, as described in Numbers 18, were twofold. The first was to attend to the "concerns of the altar." And the second was to attend to what was "within the veil." The altar, of course, was the place where the priests offered sacrifices to God. The people brought their animals, often a lamb, to the priests. The priests then slaughtered the animals on the altar for the remission of the people's sins. The priests bore the responsibility for bringing the sins of the people before God. This was symbolized by a piece of clothing the priest wore. On the shoulders of his clothing was fixed an onyx stone, one on each side. On the stones were etched the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, six on each one. So when the priest went to the altar--when he went to stand before Almighty God--he symbolically took the people with him. Notice what he was doing: *one man stood before God on behalf of all the other people.*

The reference to "within the veil" refers to a place inside the Temple called the Holy of Holies. It was a room separated from the rest of the Temple by a curtain, a "veil" it is called here. God, they believed, lived within the Holy of Holies. God's presence literally resided in that space behind the curtain. Once a year, on the day called *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would go behind that veil to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people of Israel. No one else was allowed to enter God's presence. Only the High Priest, and only one day a year. Remember what the book of Numbers said? "Any one else who comes near shall be put to death." Notice again what was happening: *one man stood before God on behalf of a whole nation of people.*

Do you see how God was separated from the people? The design of the Temple itself put God on one side of the veil and the people on the other. And the design of their religion put the priests in the presence of God but not the people.

That's the way things were until Matthew 27. Early Baptists were deeply influenced by what they read in Matthew 27. Jesus was on the cross. The final Lamb of God was being sacrificed. *The God-man stood before God on behalf of the human race—once for all.* Matthew says that he "cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit." Jesus was dead.

But back in the city of Jerusalem, inside the Temple, at the Holy of Holies, that place where they believed God lived, something happened that would radically alter our understanding of God. Matthew says,

*And behold, the curtain of the temple (the veil) was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split.*

Do you see what happened? The curtain in the Temple, that veil that separated God from the people, was torn into two pieces, all the way from the top to the bottom. That human-made barrier that kept God and people separated was torn open, giving the people access to Almighty God. Suddenly, everyone was a priest, men *and* women, Jews *and* Gentiles, clergy *and* laity, rich *and* poor, able-bodied *and* not. All the human-made barriers between God and God's people were ripped open by the death of Jesus Christ. And as a result, every person in Christ's Kingdom is a priest before God and has the right and responsibility to deal directly with God. That is the priesthood of every believer.

Weatherly is a good example of this great Baptist belief in practice. In this church, we have some members who are truly liberals in their social outlook and theology. It's not that they are trying to prove a point or cause conflict. In their heart of hearts, it is honestly where they believe God has led them. And in this church, we have some members who are truly conservatives in their social outlook and theology. For them, likewise, it is not to prove a point or cause conflict. It is honestly where they believe God has led them. And so here we are, under one roof, in one body, holding different positions on war and homosexuality and abortion and capital punishment, and many other issues. Weatherly is a Baptist church that honors our heritage of individual freedom, soul competency, the right and responsibility of every person in the congregation to deal directly with God. That requires a profound respect for the priesthood of those around us, every single believer. It is a belief that in Christ's Kingdom every person is equal, every soul competent to deal with God, everyone free to follow God wherever we believe God is leading—and every soul personally responsible

Carlyle Marney was one of our great Baptists. He was known for being a deep and profound thinker, often speaking with such abstract imagery that people couldn't understand him. Marney spoke at chapel at New Orleans seminary once. It must have been one of his more profound addresses because hardly anyone understood what he was saying.

After chapel Marney visited one of the theology classes and chatted with students. One young man, a first year student, blurted out, "Dr. Marney, I heard you in chapel a few minutes ago, and frankly I didn't understand a word you said. Can you tell me in simple language what the gospel of Jesus Christ is?"

A hush fell over the class. Legend has it that Dr. Marney stared at this young man for a moment and then walked to the chalkboard. He wrote four words on the board in all caps: GOD IS FOR YOU! And underlined "you."

That's it, isn't it? That is the profound and simple gospel of Jesus Christ. God is for *you*, and *you*, therefore, are given the right to know God. Along with that right comes great responsibility.

That is why Baptists believe in the priesthood of every believer. The Apostle Paul says that there is but one mediator between God and God's people, only one who stands between God and us, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. The God-man, Jesus Christ, was the final sacrifice, once for all. The result of His death is that the curtain

that separated you and me from God has been opened, and God invites us into a relationship. And that is what I leave you with this morning. The invitation has been extended. How responsible have you been with it?

#### Closing Prayer

O God, for the freedom we have in Christ, we give you thanks. Help us to exercise responsibility as we live in this freedom. Amen.