THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

The priesthood of all believers was a key biblical idea recovered by the Reformation that has yet to see full implementation. Luther wrote that “In the New Testament the Holy Spirit carefully avoids giving the name sacerdos, priest, to any of the apostles or to any other office. Rather He applies this name to the baptised or Christians, as their birthright and hereditary name from Baptism. For in Baptism none of us is born an apostle, preacher, teacher, pastor, but there all of us are born solely priests” [1]. This was an idea that was foundational to The Salvation Army being an army rather than a church. William Booth recognised that it takes all of God’s children to reach the world. The only pragmatic approach to reach the whole world with the gospel is the adoption of the biblical model of the priesthood of all believers.

THE BIBLICAL MODEL

In the history of the church there has typically been a divide between the “clergy” and “laity”. Traditionally clergy (or priest) has been understood to describe those in the paid employment of the church. The term laity has been understood as those who attend services and support the ministry of the clergy [2].

Biblically every Christian is “set apart for a particular ministry, [and] has both a ‘kingship’ and a ‘priesthood’” [3]. This calling to the priesthood is not only for soldiers, or those who have chosen to make a commitment to their corps. All members of the body of Christ are called to and gifted for the ministry. The terms laity (laos) and clergy (kleros) are applied in the New Testament to all Christians [3] and designate a people who are “endowed, commissioned and appointed by God to continue God’s own service and mission in the world” [4]. The priesthood that the church exercises echoes the high priesthood of Christ as he sits at the right hand of God [5].

Our theology of clergy and laity needs to embrace a-clericalism, “one people without distinction except in function, a people that transcends clericalism” [4]. The priestly role should be understood corporately, we as the body of Christ rather than as individuals have a role in the world that is “authoritative and sacerdotal”.

By Rebecca Walker
THE KINGDOM AND THE WORLD

Since the first century there has also been a shift in the thinking of the church from being Kingdom ministry focussed to being church ministry focussed [4]. Christianity can be seen as an escape from the world, rather than a taking of the Gospel out to the world [3]. And ministry is seen as maintenance of the church rather than mission to the world. This is where the pragmatism of the priesthood of all believers comes in, this world needs a “called army to address the enormous pain that is the result of sin” [6]. If Jesus was serious about preaching the gospel to all nations (Matt 28:19-20), then “it must be preached by every person who has received it” [3].

Church is most commonly seen as the gathering of Christians (ekklesia), however the role of the church as a dispersed people (diaspora) throughout the world is fundamental. It is only spread out through the world that we can reach everyone [4]. Jesus’ ministry is illustrative; he ministered “by the sea of Galilee, with fishermen, and at Jacob’s well in Samaria. He was always going places—to people’s homes, to the marketplace” [3].

The difference between those who work in the church and outside of it is not one of vocation (or calling) but rather one of office. Any role performed by a Christian is “as deeply religious as that of the priest, in fact, it too is a priestly vocation” [3]. However, typically when people are encouraged to get involved in ministry they end up doing tasks in the church, for the church. This takes up time that could better be spent in the world drawing people to God [7].

CLERGY AND LAITY

The reliance on the priesthood to perform all the ministry functions arose in the second century. Under this model the lay person’s role was to financially support the priests so that they could devote themselves purely to priestly duties [4].

In some sections of the universal church that are beginning to rely more on lay people to do the ministry, there is an assumption that if there were more clergy then the laity would not need to be involved in ministry. This is based on an underlying idea that the laity do not “have ministries in their own right, but they minister under the imprimatur of the pastor. Pastors extend their authority to the one representing them” [6]. As we have seen earlier, the priesthood actually flows from Christ’s high priesthood, and the priesthood of the clergy is the same as that of the laity.

So where does this leave the clergy? What role is there for clergy if every Christian is a priest? The New Testament does not designate any fixed church offices [3]. One model that is helpful is Ephesians 4:11-13, which describes the role of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers as preparing “God’s people for works of service”. The focus of the equipping should not be on duties within the church, but rather “duties in the office, the plant and the supermarket and the down-town slum” [8].

The other benefit is that this might also help lessen the unrealistic work loads that many ministers carry that threaten their family lives and their emotional health [9]. The officer is not the church, those in paraministries are not the church, the laity is not the church. All together all these people make up the church [2]. The work of the church should be done by everyone in the church, not just the officers.

The biblical model of ministry has all the members of the body of Christ involved. Ministry is not the sole concern of the officer. The dispersed church is the only model that will be successful in reaching the entire world with the message of Christ. This is pure pragmatism, as officers cannot do all the work and do not have all the contacts necessary to reach the whole world.

NOTES

1 Oden TC. Becoming a Minister. New York: Crossroad; 1987.