

Crazy days

The priesthood of all believers revisited

Gerald Gerbrandt

A recent issue of my congregation's newsletter included an article entitled "Crazy Days." In it the writer observes that people are leaving the church in droves, that the church's work is in decline, that nothing is predictable. This is a common view voiced by many people in positions of church leadership.

Rummage sale or resurgence?

The newsletter article quotes Phyllis Tickle, who in her book *The Great Emergence* suggests that the church is in the midst of a massive rummage sale, an occurrence that happens roughly every 500 years.¹ This is a time of upheaval and overhaul: everything is under review, with the possibility of being rethought, radically

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reoriented, or even jettisoned. The previous great rummage sale was the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. During the 500 years leading up to such a shakeup, the institutional church becomes so calcified, so set in its ways, that only a giant rummage sale can revitalize it.

In the midst of the sale, everything is in a state of upheaval and confusion, but Tickle assures us that once we have passed through the turmoil, the result is a revitalized and renewed older or former church, and a dynamic new form of Christianity. Brian

McLaren has a similar sense of our times. In books such as *A New Kind of Christian* and *A New Kind of Christianity*, he attempts to paint a picture of that new form of Christianity.²

Interestingly, these assessments are happening at the same time that Harvey Cox is writing about an "unanticipated resurgence of religion." He suggests "Christianity is growing faster than ever, but

mainly outside the West and in movements that accent spiritual experience, discipleship, and hope; pay scant attention to creeds; and flourish without hierarchies.” We are entering a new era of faith and the spirit.³ This growth, Cox says, is entirely unexpected; in *The Secular City*, published in 1965, he had instead projected the decline of religion.⁴

Are these two sets of observations about what is happening in the church today in tension with each other? Perhaps—and perhaps not. More importantly, how do we respond to these developments, and do some of our traditional theological positions look different in light of them?

Reformation understandings of the priesthood of all believers

We may not accept all aspects of Tickle’s analysis. I certainly don’t. Yet even if we find aspects of her analysis unconvincing, the image of upheaval is stimulating. Few of us are unaware of the tremors shaking the foundations of the church, and the anxiety they are producing for many. The previous such rummage sale was the soil out of which one of the great slogans of the Christian church grew: the priesthood of all believers.

Slogans are not a great way of doing theology, but in an age of sound bites and thirty-minute television mysteries, perhaps they can be a helpful way of sparking conversations. However they understand (or misunderstand) the phrase, most Mennonites would consider the priesthood of all believers an Anabaptist conviction, perhaps even an Anabaptist distinctive.

Unmediated access to God. The four volumes of the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* published in 1959 did not include an article on the priesthood of all believers, but the supplement (volume 5 of the encyclopedia, published in 1990) includes this brief note (dated 1959) by H. S. Bender: “The Priesthood of All Believers, a major point in Protestant doctrine, was strongly held by the Anabaptists and is a vital idea in Mennonitism. It means not only that no priest is necessary as a mediator between the human individual and God, so that every man has free access to God by repentance and faith in Christ, but also that all believers have a priestly office to perform for each other in that in Christ each can be a channel of God’s grace to his fellow and indeed has a responsibility to be such.”⁵

Here is reflected in a nutshell a central concern of the Protestant Reformation, though the phrase itself came much later. In the world of early sixteenth-century Europe, the Roman Catholic Church through its theology of sacraments and priesthood claimed to have a monopoly on access to God and salvation. This monopoly the Reformation shattered. No priest or intermediary is needed between God and humans, the reformers proclaimed. Whereas in Old Testament times priests officiated at sacrifices and entered the holy of holies on behalf of the people, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ the need for such sacrifices has been

Through baptism all become priests: each baptized person has the right to interpret scripture, to forgive sins, and to exercise daily discipline. There are not two classes of people, religious and lay.

eliminated. Each human being has the possibility of direct access to God for his or her own salvation.

No distinction in spiritual status. A way of expressing this conviction was to say that through baptism all become priests: each baptized person has the right to interpret scripture, to forgive sins, and to exercise daily discipline. As stated most clearly in 1 Peter 2:9 (and supported in other New Testament texts including 1 Peter 2:5; and Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6), “You are a chosen race, a

royal priesthood, a holy nation.” The bold actions of the Swiss Brethren when they baptized each other in Zollikon in 1525 are unthinkable without this conviction. Anabaptists were known for the fact that all members of the movement interpreted and taught scripture.

A practical corollary of the conviction that all become priests through baptism was the removal of any distinction in spiritual status between holy orders and laity. Luther may not have used the phrase *the priesthood of all believers*, but he did preach this aspect of its meaning: there are not two classes of people, the spiritual or religious and the temporal or lay.

This elimination of this distinction in spiritual status did not mean—for Luther, or the early Anabaptists—that there should be no order in the church, or that all believers are called to do everything. The church still needs leaders and pastors; individuals are still called to particular offices in the church, as well as more generally. In fact, the calling to vocation was an important ele-

ment in Luther's theology. But differences in calling do not create classes of spirituality.

At times this emphasis on the removal of distinctions in spiritual status has led to misunderstandings, which may be a risk of doing theology by slogan. By the 1980s Mennonite theologian Marlin Miller had become uncomfortable with some connotations this phrase had come to have, especially the idea that since all are called to be priests, the role of the pastor is to be played down, and the pastor is to be seen as just one of the congregation.⁶ Miller contributed a longer article to volume 5 of *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* on the priesthood of all believers, which indirectly corrected this misunderstanding while at the same time signalling its significance.⁷

All are called to mission. On a more positive note, the phrase also points to the role all Christians have in the mission of the church. Interestingly, perhaps in an effort to include the Mennonite emphasis on mutual support, Bender's brief definition identifies only the service members of the community provide for each other. More commonly, the role each Christian has in witnessing to the gospel beyond the community is noted. As the author of 1 Peter puts it, you have been chosen as a royal priesthood "in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9; NRSV). We understand the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19–20 to apply to all Christians. Just as Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19:6), to be "a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6), so all members of the church are called to be salt and light, to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The priesthood of all believers today

The question now is whether the phrase or slogan *the priesthood of all believers* has potential today, in the midst of the rummage sale or resurgence the church is experiencing, and if so, what might its power be? On a simple level the basic themes granted the phrase can still be affirmed today, even if further nuancing in light of current trends may be helpful.

Priesthood of all believers. Consider the emphasis on all being priests, with no spiritual distinction between clergy and laity. As

Miller wrote, Mennonites have usually agreed with this understanding of the priesthood of all believers—in theory, if not always in practice. We have usually agreed in theory, even if not always in practice, that “that all believers are called to participate in the life and witness of the church, to share in mutual discipline and forgiveness, and to test the interpretation of Scripture and doctrine.”

We may need to recover the original import of the priesthood of all believers slogan: All Christians have a calling. Each calling is a faithful response to God’s nudging, with no special status belonging to any particular call.

As pastors receive more formal training and become more professional, this gap between theory and practice may be increasing. In the 1970s there was a strong sentiment at least in some Mennonite circles against what might be called a high view of the pastor. This view Marlin Miller (then president of a Mennonite seminary) and our conference ministry offices appropriately and helpfully challenged. That era seems to have passed. Now the original import of the slogan may be needed again. All Christians have a calling (Luther), whether to church ministry or to professions such as law and teaching, or as labourers or businesspeople. Each calling is a faithful response to God’s nudging, with no special spiritual status belonging to any particular call.

Putting this into practice may require greater clarification of what some of these callings entail. If all are priests, with the right to discipline and interpret scripture and teach, then what is the particular role of the pastor or the theologian in the community? The phrase would imply that neither office has greater spiritual status than, say, that of a schoolteacher or dentist or entrepreneur, and it would also imply that neither office is there to provide all the answers for what it means to be faithful. Might we find a more helpful way of describing these offices or roles that fully recognizes their significance, that gives them an integral role in discernment conversations inside the church, while retaining the conviction that all are called as priests, and all have a role to play in interpreting scripture and testing doctrine?

Priesthood of all believers. In the past, most discussion of the phrase *priesthood of all believers* has focused on the connotations of *priesthood*: all have direct access to God, there is no difference in

spiritual status between those called to work in the church and those called to work in society; all have rights and responsibilities in the mission of the church. But what about the second noun of the phrase, *believers*? The tendency has been to take that word for granted, as simply referring to all baptized members of our congregations.

Perhaps I am quibbling here, but let me draw attention to one drawback of the slogan's reliance on the term *believers*. For Anabaptists, discipleship and ethics have been an essential component of response to Christ's invitation. I cringe when I hear the term *believer* used as a synonym for *Christian*. I do not mean to imply that belief or theology is unimportant. But Mennonites have long held that words without deeds are hollow. This conviction is reflected in the classic statement from Menno Simons, which affirms that true evangelical faith cannot lie sleeping; it clothes the naked, feeds the hungry, comforts the sorrowful, shelters the destitute. Bender's description of the priesthood of all believers alludes to this active ministry, but only in the context of life within the community. More significantly, in Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats, the difference between the two groups is not in what they believed but in what they did for the hungry and the naked (Matt. 25:31–46). Christianity is not primarily intellectual assent to a set of beliefs. If we equate being Christian with believing certain things, in using the slogan *the priesthood of all believers* we risk supporting an unfortunate misrepresentation of the Christian faith.

Including believers disaffected with the institutional church.

On a more profound or at least more foundational level, in this time of upheaval in the church, is the only option a simple equating of believers with members of the institutional church? Or to put it more provocatively, is this a twenty-first-century parallel to the medieval Catholic church's monopoly on access to God and salvation? Mennonites have a high view of church, but when we say that, are we limiting the term *church* to those who are members of our congregations? Remember: even as the institutional church appears to be in decline, Harvey Cox argues that religion is experiencing a resurgence!

This is an especially difficult question for those of us in the Anabaptist tradition, in which the concept of church, with the

connotations of mutual support and discipline, has been a core conviction. Christianity is not individualistic but a corporate endeavor, we believe. In his book on Anabaptist theology, Robert Friedman writes, “Essential for this type of church are two traits: (1) that no spiritual distinctions were made between lay members and preachers, for all were of ‘one priestly nation,’ (1 Peter 2:5, 9), and (2) that no distinctions were made between secular and sacred work, the plowing of the fields or assembling for worship, for all areas of life were in principle sanctified and transfigured within this church.”⁸ Here we see a traditional Mennonite emphasis on church, integrally connected to the main themes of the phrase *priesthood of all believers*.

But what does that mean for today, when many youth—and now young adults or even middle-aged people—have chosen not to be baptized, or have been baptized but somehow drifted away from a congregation. Here we see some aspects of the current rummage sale we are in the midst of. On the one hand, droves are leaving the institutional church, with the church experiencing traumatic change or at least anticipating such change. When speaking of the resurgence in religion, Cox adds that this revival is one that tends not to follow creeds or accept hierarchies. Or, one might add, show up for baptism or for worship on Sunday morning.

We can, of course, dismiss people who are uninterested in its institutional expressions as simply not part of the church, or as having left the church, and then—as in the past—we can continue our discussion of what the priesthood of all believers means for those of us within the church’s structures. But often these people continue to believe, and they not only believe but attempt to live ethical lives faithful to their belief. Despite my significant discomfort with the term *believers* in the slogan *priesthood of all believers*, perhaps here it challenges the way we Mennonites have tended to think and function. Neither the phrase nor the teaching of Christ, for that matter, puts a lot of weight on what we call church membership. The notion of the priesthood of all believers does emphasize mutual support, and communal hermeneutics, but not church membership. Might the slogan at this point push us to find a new way of including these “believers” in the community that has been named a “royal priesthood?”

I am not about to propose a radically different understanding of church, but I also struggle with how to tie together the dynamics the Christian movement is experiencing today with a New Testament understanding of church. The church today is changing. Along with Phyllis Tickle I trust this will lead to a revitalized traditional church. But it may also result in a new form of Christianity which we may not recognize if we only look at it through old glasses. Perhaps our responsibility is to remain in dialogue with believers outside the traditional church, always holding before them the corporate nature of the body of Christ and the characteristics of mutual accountability and discipline which we hold dear, without attempting to force them into the model we have developed.

Notes

¹ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 16–17.

² Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), 2001; and *A New Kind of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

³ Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 1, 8.

⁴ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1965).

⁵ H. S. Bender, “Priesthood of All Believers,” *Mennonite Encyclopedia* 5 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1959), 1116; available online at <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/P752ME.html>.

⁶ From personal conversation with Marlin Miller.

⁷ Marlin Miller, “Priesthood of All Believers,” *Mennonite Encyclopedia* 5 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 721–22; available online at <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/P752ME.html>.

⁸ Robert Friedman, *The Theology of Anabaptism*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History 15 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978), 120–21.

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