

## Believer Priests

*Ex 19:4-8; Nm 11:24-30; 1<sup>st</sup> Sm 3; Is 61:1-6; Jr 31:31-34; Jl 2:28; Mt 28:16-20; Ac 2:17-18; 1<sup>st</sup> Co 14:1; 1<sup>st</sup> Tm 2:5-6; Hb 10:19-24; 1<sup>st</sup> Pt 2:3-10; Rv 1:5-6; 5:9-10*



The Bible is chock full of the terms, priest, priests, priestly, and priesthood (961 occurrences in the Bible). What is a priest? What is the role of a priest? What does being a priest have to do with being Baptist? Haven't we left the concept of a priesthood behind us somewhere in history? Why should the term have any meaning for us today as Baptist Christians? After all, as Baptists we don't have priests, or do we?

Let's start with some basic definitions. The term priest refers essentially to one who serves God, especially in regard to sacrifice and worship. Various passages indicate that one of the functions of the priest is to prophesy<sup>1</sup> and otherwise mediate the word and presence of God before the people and the people before the presence of God in the temple. The priest is also responsible for instructing the people regarding the will and worship of God. The term normally references an official class charged with officiating the religious life of the community, especially as regards sacrifice and worship. From this, we might say that the priestly function is fourfold: 1) officiating sacrifice and worship, 2) serving as mediator between God and the people, 3) instructing the people in regard to the will of God, and 4) being the personal representative of structured religion.

If those are the major roles and functions of priests, do we as Baptists and New Testament believers have priests? Our first answer is, "No." We do not employ a system of sacrifices on an altar, and therefore, we do not have priests to officiate their presentation in a temple or at any other altar. "No," we do not have an official clerical class to mediate between God and ourselves as the people of God. Jesus is our only mediator<sup>2</sup>, and His mediation is sufficient for all. "No," we do not have a special class of persons to speak on behalf of God, for God has written His Word on our hearts and the Holy Spirit lives within the life of every believer.<sup>3</sup> "No," we do not have a special class to represent God in formal religious molds in the role of mediator. Though we may often call upon pastors or denominational workers to fulfill this priestly function, it is not rightly theirs. This is, then our first answer, "No, we do not have priests."

On the other hand, our answer must be, "Yes." To begin with, we do have a high priest—Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> Jesus is the one who opened access for us to God.<sup>5</sup> Beyond Jesus as our high priest, we do have other priests—every believer is one.<sup>6</sup> Yet we do not have a specific priestly class, though we are often tempted to place our pastors and other professional ministers in the category of a professional priesthood. While it is tempting to give this responsibility to professional ministers, that is not their appropriate position in accordance with the New Testament witness. The New Testament calls on each Christian to serve as a minister of God's Word. God's prophetic anointing is available

<sup>1</sup> See Numbers 11:24-30 and 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 3.

<sup>2</sup> See 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 2:5-6; Hebrews 7:25.

<sup>3</sup> See John 14:16-20, Isaiah 65:24; Jeremiah 31:33-34; Joel 2:26-29; Romans 8:9; 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 2:11-13.

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 4:14-16.

<sup>5</sup> John 14:1-7.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 19:4-8; Isaiah 61:6; 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:3-10.

to every believer without restriction.<sup>7</sup> With this anointing come the responsibility for ministry—a responsibility shared by all.<sup>8</sup>

As priests, we do not minister blood or cereal sacrifices before God. Though we offer ourselves to God and receive and communicate God's will and presence, we are not called to officiate sacrifice or other religious rites. We do not teach each other to know God,<sup>9</sup> though we encourage each other to know God better and to serve with faithfulness.<sup>10</sup>

Do we, then, have priests? No, we do not *have* priests. We *are* priests—both corporately and individually. We are not priests in terms of mediating God's presence before the people of God, but as priests we are charged with mediating God's presence into the world around us. We are priests, in the sense that we are the hands and feet of Christ. We are priests of God as our mouths communicate the word and will of our Lord. We are priests as we serve God in teaching others what we have learned and encouraging others in our mutual ministry and service.

So then, God has called us to be the priests and prophets of God before the nations. We are called to disciple the nations—bring them into a dependent relationship with God, being converted and teaching them to obey the instructions of God. God did not call a professional class of priests or ministers to carry out this commission. It was delivered by Jesus to an ignorant group of fishermen and other low-life from Jewish society. They were to carry out the commission of Christ before the world.

So have we received the same commission.<sup>11</sup> In the task we assume different functions as individuals, but our call is one and that singular call is for all.<sup>12</sup> We are charged with the mission to mediate God's presence and word into the world (as priests and prophets). We are also charged to grow each other and enable each other in our common mission. This task is greater than what can be done by a professional ministry. That is why Christ's commission was given to us all to announce the good news of God's reign in our hearts.

So then, we are priests. We do not have priests, but we are priests. We are called to be priests and prophets to proclaim the news and will of Christ into all the world. Each of us is gifted in a different manner to carry out a portion of that task, but we are all on mission.

Each believer is a priest. As believer priests, it is our mission to make disciples of Christ Jesus, proclaiming Christ throughout the world to lead others into fellowship with God and teaching them to follow God's direction in our lives. We are not called to sit in pews, to follow the dictates of others, to allow others to mediate God's presence to us, nor to relinquish our responsibilities of service to ministers under our pay. We are called to bear fruit by taking seriously our calling to serve God. This service is corporate, but it is also individual.

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<sup>7</sup> Joel 2:28; Matthew 28:18; Luke 2:36; John 14:16-20; Acts 2:17-18; 18:26; 21:9; 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 14:1.

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 4:11-16.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah 31:34.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 28:16-20; John 14:26; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 4:6-16.

<sup>11</sup> Mt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8.

<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 4:11-16.

How will we carry out the priestly functions to which we are called? How will we allow God to use us as Central Baptist Church and as believer priests in fulfilling the roles we have been given?

Before going further, let's stop and reflect on what we have done in fulfilling our calling:

- 1) What have we done as individuals and as a church body to mediate God's presence in Amherst County, in Virginia, in the United States, in the world?
- 2) How have we taught others outside of this church about God and God's will for their lives?
- 3) Are we serving to represent those who actively and faithfully serve God, calling others to join us in the same?
- 4) Are we speaking to the world on God's behalf, calling others to know God personally and to join us in giving their lives Godly service?

If we are God's believer priests, we are under commission to bring Christ to the nations and the nations in discipleship to God. What can we do to be more faithful in carrying out our calling and become the believer priests that Christ has called us to be? It is as we answer that question that we will find God's purpose in our lives as individuals and as a body. As believer priests of Christ Jesus, we must never relinquish our responsibility to be in the direct presence of God, nor to take God's presence before others. If we relinquish our personal responsibilities to represent Christ to the world, we likewise relinquish our right to be called the children of God.

Jesus said that if we love Him, we will keep His commandments.<sup>13</sup> His commandments are to love the world even as He did, giving His life to bring us into God's presence. We are called to love the world in the same manner,<sup>14</sup> giving our lives that the world might know the love of God that constrains us to follow Jesus' model of obedience to God's will. We are His priests, the mediators of His presence, will, and love.

Will we serve in faithfulness?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*

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<sup>13</sup> John 14:15-24.

<sup>14</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:11-15; Ephesians 5:1-2.

## Living Faith

*Gn 15:6; Lk 7:36-50; 9:1-6; 10:25-37; Ep 4:12-16; Pp 3:10-16; Cl 3:12-17; 1<sup>st</sup> Pt 2:1-3; 2<sup>nd</sup> Pt 1:3-15*



What is faith? What does it mean to have faith—saving faith in Jesus Christ? It is said of Abraham that he believed God.<sup>15</sup> That is the Genesis expression of Abraham’s faith—believing God. It is to this same expression of faith that Paul refers in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians. To believe God is to trust. It is an active expression of reliance, confidence, and dependence upon God. It is to live in acceptance of God’s faithfulness, following God in obedience. It is to this manner of faith that Jesus called the disciples: “Follow me.”

Jesus’ challenge of “Follow me” is the major invitation to discipleship and salvation in the gospels.<sup>16</sup> This is the call that Jesus issues to the twelve, inviting them to become his disciples. As Jesus’ disciples, it would become their responsibility to learn from Jesus and in time to teach others what they would learn from Jesus. This is also the class of faith that Jesus praises: expressions of confidence in God’s good will and faithfulness.<sup>17</sup>

In the Sermon on the Mount, it is this confidence in God to which Jesus points as the reason to seek the rule of God in our lives.<sup>18</sup> Confidence in God allows one to trust that God will care for our needs. It is to a lack of confidence in God that Jesus points to as faithlessness in the disciples as he slept during a storm on the sea.<sup>19</sup> The sinful woman who came to wash Jesus’ feet expressed a confidence that as a Jew she should not have had. The Pharisees among whom Jesus was eating were appalled that Jesus would allow such a sinful person to touch him. By popular doctrine, God would in no way accept a person living in sin. In her sinfulness, however, she came to Jesus with a confident expectation that God would respect her repentance and contrition. Jesus accepted her attitude of contrition and confidence—it is this that he calls faith.<sup>20</sup>

When Jesus commissioned his disciples on their first mission, it is in the bounds of living out this confidence in God that he sends them. They are to take no provision for themselves. They are to trust God to provide for their needs. It is in living out their faith that God will provide for them that Jesus tells them to proclaim the rule (kingdom) of God.<sup>21</sup> As they preach God’s rule, they are to live out the confidence of their faith. An essential aspect of their message is that God provides. God is worthy of our confidence, for God is love and cares for sinful humanity.

Obviously, Jesus ministry involved teaching. He called the twelve to become his disciples—ones who study under a Rabbi (teacher) with the responsibility to carry on and propagate what they learn. Jesus came teaching about the rule of God—God’s kingdom that had been foretold by the

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6-9; James 2:23.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 8:18-22; 9:9; 10:24-25; 10:38; 13:31-33; 16:24; 18:1-6; 19:28-30; Mark 1:17; 2:14; 8:34; 10:21; Luke 9:23-27; 10:25-37

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 15:21-28; Luke 7:1-10.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 6:25-34.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 8:23-27.

<sup>20</sup> Luke 7:36-50.

<sup>21</sup> Luke 9:1-6.

prophets. He taught the disciples about God's love and approachability.<sup>22</sup> He taught them to depend upon God. He taught them to recognize and accept that God required repentance, but allowed any and all to come into His presence.<sup>23</sup> Jesus taught them that God's will could not be reduced to a legalistic reading of commandments but must be lived in the spirit of love and compassion.<sup>24</sup>

While Jesus spent three years teaching the disciples, his teaching did not focus on details of doctrine. He did not teach so much about knowing God, but trusting God and living out a life of trust and confidence. Part of this was because much of common Jewish theology already gave the disciples a good understanding about God. In great part, however, it was because his emphasis was not on intellectual understanding and acceptance. His emphasis was on accepting God's will, approachability, and lordship. This de-emphasis on knowledge finds reflection in the multitude of verses that speak of the disciples' lack of comprehension.<sup>25</sup>

Understanding is an essential part of faith, but it is not the most essential. Jesus spent time teaching the disciples, but the import of his teaching was not information about God and proper doctrine. Jesus' emphasis was on applying the principles of the gospel to life. In the passage regarding the greatest commandment, Jesus specifies that it is to practice love.<sup>26</sup> In this passage, the intent of the term love centers on active service—living in a manner that pleases or is in the best interest of another. This is the character of Jesus' sacrificial love on the cross. Paul urges the Thessalonians to practice living in a way that pleases God, detailing that this was the main ingredient in his teaching them.<sup>27</sup>

Faith is therefore something that we live. It is not essentially about knowledge, but about character and action—it is a life of trusting and obeying God, even as Abraham. Faith is a decision to receive God and enter into relationship through Christ.<sup>28</sup> The Hebrew and Greek terms for faith are relational terms. They stress an attitude or act of depositing confidence of trust in another.<sup>29</sup> Faith is therefore a way of relating to God in confidence.

This is the same definition of faith that was set forth in the preamble of the *Baptist Faith and Message of 1963*:

*“Baptists are a people who profess a living faith. This faith is rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ who is ‘the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.’ Therefore, the sole authority*

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 11:28-30.

<sup>23</sup> Luke 10:13-16; 13:1-5; 15:11-32.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 12:1-14; Luke 13:10-17.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 15:16; Mark 4:13; 6:52; 7:14; 7:18; 8:17; 8:21; 9:32; 12:33; John 8:43; 12:16; 13:7; 20:9.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 22:34-39.

<sup>27</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 4:1.

<sup>28</sup> John 1:11-13; Romans 8:12-17; 1<sup>st</sup> John 2:25-3:24.

<sup>29</sup> Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*, p. 938-939. Referring to one of the primary Hebrew terms for faith, Erickson says, “It does not connote intellectual belief as much as it suggests trust and a committing of oneself.” Dealing with the Greek term, for faith, Erickson suggests some cognitive elements in some instances of the term, yet also insists there are instances in which the terms “signify ‘personal trust as distinct from mere credence of belief.’” (p. 939).

BAUER, *Greek English Lexicon*. Bauer denotes for ΠΙΣΤΙΣ meanings ranging as derivatives from the English terms for reliability, trust and confidence (pp. 662-664).

Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon*. BDB denotes mainly uses meanings ranging on the English terms for support, faithfulness, reliability, and firmness for יָצַק and its derivatives (pp. 52-54).

*for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ whose will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures.*

*“A living faith must experience a growing understanding of truth and must be continually interpreted and related to the needs of each new generation. Throughout their history Baptist bodies, both large and small, have issued statements of faith which comprise a consensus of their beliefs. Such statements have never been regarded as complete, infallible statements of faith, nor as official creeds carrying mandatory authority. ...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.”<sup>30</sup>*

We are called, therefore, to a living faith. A faith that expresses itself in a life given to following God’s will and trusting in God’s provision. Our faith calls us into dependence upon God and laying ourselves aside that Christ might live in and through us.

As Central Baptist Church and the people of God, how are we giving expression to our faith? In what ways have we shown that our lives are in direct relationship with God? How have we shown to our community that we have become the children of God?

How will we live our faith? What difference should it make in how we live and work as a church and as individuals? A living faith must work itself out in action—otherwise it is no faith at all. Do our lives speak of faith? How can we be more effective in living out our call to faithfulness and trust?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*

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<sup>30</sup> *Southern Baptist Convention Annual*. “Report of Committee On Baptist Faith and Message” 1963, pp.269-281.

## Living Grace

*Gn 25:17-26:34; Jn 1:14-17; Acts 11:23; 15:6-21; 20:24-32; Rm 4:13-5:2; 11:5-6; Gal 2:19-3:14; Ep 1:5-14; 2:4-10; 2<sup>nd</sup> Tm 1:8-14; 1<sup>st</sup> Pt 4:1-11*



We are believer priests professing a living faith—a living faith that begins in God’s grace and is lived out under the grace of God. It is God’s grace that brought us into faith, and it is by grace that we remain under God’s care. As Baptists, we have understood and rallied around the wonderful message of God’s marvelous grace reaching out in love to sinful humanity.

The message of God’s grace we perhaps know best as set forth in the cherished words of John Newton:

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

*‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!*

*Through many danger, toils, and snares, I have already come;  
‘Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*

*The Lord hath promised good to me, His word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.<sup>31</sup>*

We sing the message of God’s amazing grace—grace that meets the undeserving sinner and showers the repentant with God’s love. We appear to understand grace as it relates to the beginning of our salvation. We seem to have more trouble with grace as it relates to our continuing in faith under God’s care.

God’s salvation comes to us out of the bounty of God’s love and grace. In grace we are touched by love even while sinners—granted life by the Author of life and called unto a living faith.<sup>32</sup> This grace of God brought forth in amazing love is hard for us to comprehend. Yet it is through this amazing love that we find grace and peace and life in Christ. There is, however, a great temptation to begin a life of grace only to take up a yoke of bondage and make ourselves once again slaves to a burden that is not ours to bear. Paul considers this a perversion of the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup>

It is regarding this perversion of the gospel of grace that Paul writes to the Galatians. He reminds them that it was in grace that they as he came to God. They were not justified by deeds of righteousness, but by the singular gift of God.<sup>34</sup> To Paul, the grace of God is the message of faith, for grace and faith are so intertwined as to be inseparable and interchangeable.<sup>35</sup> It is in faith that we

<sup>31</sup> Newton, John (1725-1807). “Amazing Grace”.

<sup>32</sup> Ephesians 1:5-10; 2:4-10.

<sup>33</sup> Galatians 1:6-7.

<sup>34</sup> Galatians 2:16-3:9.

<sup>35</sup> Galatians 1:15; 2:9,16,20-21; 3:8,11-14; Ephesians 2:8-10.

receive God’s grace—the gift of life with Christ. It is in faith that we live under God’s grace and continue our lives in Christ.

The Galatians were struggling with the “gospel” of the Judaizers. This group wanted the Gentile converts to become Jews and live under the constraints of the law of Moses and the traditional interpretation of the law. They preached that they must be circumcised and obey the demands of the law. Paul, however, was violently opposed to such. Paul preached freedom in Christ—freedom from the law, from sin, and for grace.<sup>36</sup>

We are saved in grace through faith. We are saved by grace to live in faith. We are saved by grace to live out our faith—to bear fruit worthy of our calling, salvation, redemption. Paul points out that we were not saved by bearing fruit, but in order that we might be able to bear fruit.<sup>37</sup> It is grace that launches us into a living relationship of faith in God. It is grace that gives us the ability to live out that relationship. It is grace that provides for us a sufficient purpose for our lives—“good works that God prepared for us beforehand to become our way of life.”<sup>38</sup>

Looking back at Newton’s hymn, it is in grace that we continue to live out our call of discipleship, face the turmoil of life, and remain comforted in God’s provision and care. It is grace that ensures the goodness of God and gives us confidence to press on with Paul toward the call of God—a call to be united with Christ.<sup>39</sup>

If we look back upon the Gospels and their characterization of Jesus’ disciples, we see God dealing with them in grace from the very beginning. They are called to discipleship in grace—not out of any personal merit of their own.<sup>40</sup> On the path of discipleship, all of Jesus’ followers desert Him, from the crowds that acclaimed Him as Messiah to Judas, to Peter, to the twelve and the women who followed to the tomb.<sup>41</sup> As they all disown Christ after avowing to follow Him to their deaths, it is yet grace that calls them back to faith.<sup>42</sup>

“It was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.”<sup>43</sup> It was grace that brought the disciples to Christ’s call to follow in faithfulness. It was grace that taught them their need for God. It was grace that met them in their need in the midst of their failure, despair, and denial. It was in grace that Jesus called them back into faith, forgiveness, and mission. “’Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”<sup>44</sup>

It is to the grace of God then, to which we are called. As we have received God’s grace, we are to live out the will of God.<sup>45</sup> The grace that we have received is granted with the purpose that we might live in accordance with the calling to discipleship. Salvation—our living faith—is a free

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<sup>36</sup> Galatians 3:23-29; 5:2-15; Philippians 3:2-9.

<sup>37</sup> Ephesians 2:8-10.

<sup>38</sup> Ephesians 2:10.

<sup>39</sup> Philippians 3:12-14; 1:21-23.

<sup>40</sup> Luke 19:1-10.

<sup>41</sup> Mark 14:43-16:8.

<sup>42</sup> John 21:1-19.

<sup>43</sup> Newton, John. *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 4:1-11.

gift. It is grace. Yet it is grace with responsibility. We are not simply saved from the law and sin and death. We are saved into relationship with God, into fullness of life, unto a purpose of fulfilling the plans of God for our daily living.

“The Lord hath promised good to me; His Word my hope secures. He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.”<sup>46</sup> That verse is meaningless unless we accept the purpose of the grace of God. Unless we are ready to embrace the life of discipleship and service to which we are called, God’s grace is worthless to us, for it is in living by grace and living out grace that our lives are filled with purpose and meaning.

Perhaps that is why we have developed the habit of skipping this last verse of Newton’s hymn. Perhaps we are uncomfortable as Baptists with the demands involved making God our shield. Having Christ as our portion means that what we receive out of faith and grace is Christ himself. It means that we are willing to follow the pattern set forth in the words of Peter—accepting the need and call to suffer for Christ’s sake, living the balance of our lives in accordance with the will of God, rather than our own.

If we accept the demands of grace, we must lay our own will aside and live out the will of Christ. We must allow grace to be more than a means of receiving blessing—it must be a means of relating to others and living out the call of Christ Jesus.

Living by grace is to allow God’s grace not simply to flow into us, but to flow through us. This is the amazing grace by which we are called to live. It is grace that saves us from our wretchedness and self-centeredness and fills our lives with meaning, purpose, and the mind of Christ.<sup>47</sup>

How have we shown God’s grace to the world around us? In what manner have we lived out the implications of grace? Have we enslaved ourselves once more to self, sin, or legalism? Or have we allowed our lives to shine as beacons and vessels of the grace of God that we so amazingly have received in Christ Jesus?

What would be necessary for Central Baptist Church—for ourselves—to shine forth and proclaim the amazing grace of God, even as John professes with regard to Jesus? “And we beheld his glory ... full of grace and truth. From His fullness we have all received grace upon grace.”<sup>48</sup>

May His light so shine in us, that we might live from grace, by grace, and for grace.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*

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<sup>46</sup> Newton, *op. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> Philippians 2:5-8.

<sup>48</sup> John 1:14-16.

## Lord of the Word

*Ps 96; Mt 4:4; 12:1-14; 15:1-9; 23:16-22; Mk 2:23-3:6; 7:5-13; Lk 6:1-11; 13:10-17; Jn 1:1-18; 3:31-36; 6:63-69; 8:47; Pp 2:5-11; Cl 3:16-17; 2<sup>nd</sup> Tm 2:14-15; Hb 13:7-8; 1<sup>st</sup> Pt 1:22-25; 3:14-16; 4:11; 1<sup>st</sup> Jn 1:1-10; Rv 3:14; 19:11-16*



We have called ourselves the People of the Book. At times, this designation has been hurled at us as an accusation of insanity. Yet we have accepted the title in our reverence for the Bible—the written Word of God. As a People of the Book, however, what does the Bible mean to us? What is its purpose, identity, and worth? Why do we treasure it above all others and seek to study it and show ourselves approved in our handling of its message?

*“Sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura.”* These were the banner words of the Reformation under Martin Luther: grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone. Salvation comes by the grace of God apart from any work of righteousness, sacrifice, or sacrament. One receives the saving grace of God simply by faith—trusting God and accepting the gift of salvation. The authority for faith, doctrine, and life rests in the Bible alone, not in an institution, not in tradition, not in councils of the church, not in a priesthood. Grace, faith, and Scripture were the banner words of the Reformation. We have no salvation apart from God’s grace. We cannot receive God’s grace apart from a living faith. We have no creed apart from the Bible.

**The Word is of God is the expression of God’s will and message:** It is God’s Word to which we turn for definitions of faith, of practice, of doctrine. It is to the Word of God that we turn for understanding the will of God and the purpose of faith, the meaning of grace and love. This is the Word that we preach and proclaim both to a lost world and to each other as we encourage one another in our mutual priestly service.

The Old Testament sets forth a basic understanding of God’s Word, defining it initially as the expression of God’s will and commandment to the chosen people. Initially, then, God’s Word is the revealed will and message of God as found in the mouths of the prophets and the written text of Scripture.<sup>49</sup> This Word is often referred to as the Law of the Lord,<sup>50</sup> yet it is still God’s message of instruction—the expression of God’s will, plan, and purpose. This term does not necessarily reflect the Mosaic law, but refers as well to the Word revealed through the prophets like Isaiah.<sup>51</sup>

God’s Word, then, is the expression of God’s will—God’s instruction to the people. It is the written expression, but it is also the message given to the prophets. It is written, but it is first of all the spoken Word. It is God’s revelation to humanity. This Word is the expression of God’s identity, instruction, will, and purpose. It is God’s message to humanity.

**The Word is of God is in Christ Jesus:** Hebrews begins detailing how God’s Word was expressed in many ways and by various means. Ultimately, however, that Word was expressed through Jesus Christ. In Jesus we see the glory of God reflected. We understand God’s nature in

<sup>49</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3:14-17; 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 1:20-21; Jeremiah 1:1-2:3; Genesis 15:1-6; Exodus 9:20-21; 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 3:1-21; 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 13:1-32.

<sup>50</sup> Psalm 119; Luke 2:22-24.

<sup>51</sup> Isaiah 28:11-12; 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 14:21.

this expression of God's creative Word.<sup>52</sup> It is in Christ Jesus that we understand God's message of reconciliation and grace.<sup>53</sup>

**The Word of God is Christ Jesus:** The Gospel of John begins with the Word of God, throwing us back to Genesis chapter one with its description of God pronouncing creation into being through the voicing of God's will. John goes on to say that this active, creative pronouncement of God's will created flesh to live among us in order to announce more fully the identity of God and God's will for our lives.<sup>54</sup> John's announcement of the Word of God is that Jesus Christ is this Word.

To John, Jesus is God's active presence in the world. It is Christ who created order in the midst of the primal chaos, and it is Christ who creates order in the midst of the chaos of our lives. It is God's initiative that creates order in a chaotic world, and God's active Word that give structure to our lives. It is in Christ Jesus that God's redemptive will found expression. It is in Christ Jesus that God's expressed will became reality and created life within us. It is in this incarnate Word that we have been called and received as children of God.<sup>55</sup> It is the crucified incarnate Word that Paul preached in Corinth.<sup>56</sup>

**The Word of God is the message proclaimed by Christ Jesus:** The Word of God is the message that Jesus preached.<sup>57</sup> It is His teaching of the Kingdom—the rule of God in the hearts of all who come in faith. It is these words of life to which the disciples point as central to Jesus' message.<sup>58</sup> The Word of God is this kingdom message that brings for life in the believer.

It is this message of Christ that Jesus commissioned the disciples to teach as they went out to disciple the nations.<sup>59</sup> The good news is the Word of Christ—His message of life—that we are called to grow in our hearts.<sup>60</sup> The good news of Christ is the essence of Paul's preaching.<sup>61</sup> This is the Word of God that Paul occupied himself with preaching,<sup>62</sup> for Paul's gospel was Christ, and Christ's message of redemption and reconciliation.

This Word of God in all its specific definitions is the authoritative source for Baptists in defining what we are to believe. The written Word teaches us to know God, to understand the message of Christ Jesus, to know how God calls us to live out His will.

Yet as Baptists, we do not accept the Bible as the supreme authority. The Bible is not the final Word of God—it is the written record of God's Word to us. There is one authority that stands above this written Word. That is the Lord of the Word to whom the Bible itself ascribes full

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<sup>52</sup> Hebrews 1:1-4.

<sup>53</sup> Ephesians 1:5-14.

<sup>54</sup> John 1:1-18; Genesis 1:1-2:4; Hebrews 11:3; 1<sup>st</sup> John 1:1-3.

<sup>55</sup> John 1:10-12; 1<sup>st</sup> John 2:29-3:3.

<sup>56</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 2:1-5.

<sup>57</sup> John 8:31-32; 14:23-24; 18:37; Mark 1:38-39.

<sup>58</sup> John 6:63-69.

<sup>59</sup> Matthew 28:19-20.

<sup>60</sup> Colossians 3:16-17.

<sup>61</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 3:2.

<sup>62</sup> Acts 18:1-11.

authority and lordship.<sup>63</sup> The written Word of God has validity, authority, and purpose, precisely because it points to the authority and lordship of Christ. It is this Word—the incarnate Word—that is Lord.

Jesus dealt with this concept in response to the excesses of Pharisaic interpretation of the written Word of God.<sup>64</sup> Just as Messiah is Lord of the Sabbath, Messiah is Lord of the written Word of God. He is Lord of the Sabbath specifically because He is Lord of the Word. The Word is His: it belongs to Him, it is about Him, it is His message, it comes from Him. Christ is the Word of God—the Word incarnate. He is Lord over the written Word. The written Word of God is about Christ and belongs to Christ. It does not own or control Christ.

During the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, he interpreted the written Word about God to the people in His day. He clarified revelation of God's love, grace, and acceptance of sinful humanity who came in repentance. He taught of immortality<sup>65</sup> that beforehand was not clear. He brought to light that we can live freely in God's presence—beforehand only a future hope expressed by prophets like Joel.

After Jesus' resurrection, the disciples continued to learn from God's Word, even as Peter came to understand that the laws of ritual purity did not apply under Christ.<sup>66</sup> The written Word is faithful and authoritative, but it does not rule over its Lord. It is in this understanding that we proclaim the Lordship of Christ, even over the written expression of God's Word. The written Word is a witness to Christ, yet it cannot take His place.

As we dealt with the reality of a living faith in dependence upon God, we added our reliance upon God's marvelous grace. It is in this grace that we lay our lives under the Lordship of Christ Jesus. In actuality, Baptists did not add Christ's lordship to the banner words of the Reformation, we placed Christ's lordship above them. Repeatedly, Baptists have stressed from our beginning that we have no creed other than the Bible. Even so, our reading of the Bible and the written words of God must be interpreted within the confines of Christ's lordship.

Will we allow the Word of Christ to dwell richly in our hearts? Will we allow the Lord of this Word to rule in our hearts?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*

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<sup>63</sup> Psalm 96.

<sup>64</sup> Matthew 12:1-14; 15:1-20; 23:16-22.

<sup>65</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 1:10.

<sup>66</sup> Acts 10:1-48.

## Indwelling of the Spirit

*Gn 5:21-24; 6:8-9; Is 63:11; Ez 36:27; Mt 28:16-20; Jn 14:1-15:17; 16:13; Ac 5:29-32; 6:5; Rm 5:1-5; 8:1-39; 1Cor 1:9; 2:6-16; 3:16-17; 6:17-20; 12:12-13; 2Cor 1:21-22; 5:5,17; 6:16; 13:5; Gl 2:20; 3:13-14; 4:3-7; 5:16-6:8; Ep 3:17-20; 5:15-20; Cl 1:26-27; 3:3-4; 1<sup>st</sup>Tm 1:13-14; 2<sup>nd</sup>Tm 1:14; Tt 3:4-7; Jm 4:5; 1<sup>st</sup>Pt 4:14; 1<sup>st</sup>Jn 1:3; 2:27; 3:24; 4:13-16; Rev 3:20*



We talk about Christ living in us. We speak of our responsibility to take God's presence into all the world around us. We have seen that our faith must be a living reality based upon our close dependence on God. But what does it mean to say that God lives within us?

In the Old Testament, the people knew of God's presence with the prophets as in the life of Moses, Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha. God became real to them mainly through those with a special anointing of God's Spirit. Some like Samson received special temporary anointing to carry out special tasks to free the nation from the oppression of their enemies. Others, however, walked with God in a more intimate manner, as in the case of Enoch. We often overlook it, but the description of Enoch's walk with God is repeated in the description of Noah, the singular righteous man of his day--one who walked with God.<sup>67</sup>

It is to this intimacy that the prophets refer in their expressions of hope for the day in which God would pour out the Spirit upon all the nation. God's presence on that day would become a much greater and deeper reality than the nation had ever known. Rather than Enoch being an isolated case to be repeated once in a few generations, God's presence would be accessible and manifest to an entire generation. God would be known, God would anoint all, and God would dwell within the lives of the people.<sup>68</sup>

Joel proclaimed a day in which the prophetic anointing of God's Spirit would be available to all, even to the women, youth, and slaves.<sup>69</sup> Peter preached that this was the meaning of the events at Pentecost--the first fruits of the new covenant written upon hearts of flesh, God's anointing available to all.<sup>70</sup> While the abundance of God's prophetic anointing is one issue of the texts, there is more to the promise than the fact that God is available to all.

Jesus promised to send the disciples the Spirit of Truth. He told them that though the world did not know the Spirit, they already did, since the Spirit was already among them. His promise, however, was that the Spirit of God would no longer simply be among them and known by them. The Spirit would live within them, bringing them into closer fellowship and relationship with God.<sup>71</sup>

This indwelling to the Spirit is a change from the common way of referencing God's presence with and anointing of the prophets of old. The normal understanding was that the Spirit or Word of God came to a prophet with a message, expressing the will of God. As the Spirit would come to the

<sup>67</sup> Genesis 5:21-24; 6:8-9.

<sup>68</sup> Ezekiel 11:17-21; 36:26-27; 37:14.

<sup>69</sup> Joel 2:26-28.

<sup>70</sup> Acts 2:16-21.

<sup>71</sup> John 14:15-17.

prophet, the Spirit would likewise leave. One was anointed, set aside for prophetic or priestly service, yet one waited for the special moments of God's intervention and communication. No longer would it be so, Jesus declared. God's Spirit would live within the disciples, making a home within them and leading them in all truth. This anointing is not external, nor is it temporary. It is an intimate, internal, permanent union of one's spirit with that of God.

"I will never leave you, nor forsake you... I go away and come again... I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you... When I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."<sup>72</sup> Jesus spoke in language of closeness, nearness, constant presence, of inner being. He looked for the day in which as disciples we would receive the inner anointing of His presence and assurance.

It is to this that Paul alludes in speaking of Christ being within us, serving to give us hope of a future.<sup>73</sup> He speaks likewise of this in referencing our bodies as temples or dwellings of God's Spirit.<sup>74</sup> This indwelling of Christ Jesus in the believer is a reflection of God's love, care, and personal relationship with each individual.

In a similar manner, the New Testament writers spoke of our becoming the children of God, relating to God not as a far-removed ruler and judge, but as a loving, caring parent.<sup>75</sup> This is the quality of our internal relationship with the presence of Christ within. It is not God within us controlling our lives in dictatorial fashion,<sup>76</sup> but granting us peace, hope, love, and confidence. God's Spirit is available and present, yet we must grant God permission to make that presence a living and active reality.

It is from this inner confidence, hope, and peace that Paul considers Christ to be his life.<sup>77</sup> In like manner, he calls us to recognize that Christ is our life--both our present life and that of our future.<sup>78</sup> We have been raised out of sin and out of ourselves and placed into Christ. As Christ Jesus lives in us, we are to live in Him and live out the reality of His presence in our daily lives.

We have been called as believers to mediate God's presence, will, word, and love to a world in dire need of God. We have been called to a living faith of reliance and dependence upon God—the God who gave His life for us, doing everything needful for us to draw close to Him in an intimate way. We have been blessed with the Word of God, the gospel of Christ Jesus. It is this very Word—that comes to dwell within our hearts, inundating our lives with the presence of the Almighty. It is this inner Word that communicates to us and through us the will and call of Christ.

As the believer priests of Christ Jesus, we are not left alone with our commission. We are not abandoned to a life of lone service and ministry. We are called first of all to God. We are called to an inner relationship and anointing of the Spirit—the presence—of the Almighty. It is the

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<sup>72</sup> John 14:1-20.

<sup>73</sup> Colossians 1:26-27.

<sup>74</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:17-20; 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 6:16.

<sup>75</sup> John 1:10-12; Romans 8:9-17; 1<sup>st</sup> John 3:1-3.

<sup>76</sup> James 4:5-8.

<sup>77</sup> Philippians 1:21.

<sup>78</sup> Colossians 3:1-4.

Word that dwells within us, enabling us to carry out our mission in developing the character of our lives and bringing the news of God’s nearness and acceptance to the world around us.

The Word of Christ calls us to a life of discipleship, commitment, and service. This same Word enables us to fulfill our calling. This same Word lives within us, giving us all we need to be faithful messengers and mediators of God’s presence.

We can mediate God’s presence and will, for God lives within our hearts, enabling and preparing us for service.

We are called and commissioned. In the midst of that call, we are anointed with the very Word of God—the Word that spoke the world into order. That same Word is come to dwell in our hearts richly. May we allow the Word to fill us, that His presence might overflow to those in whose midst we dwell. May we be His presence, even as He is present in our lives. May the anointing of the Word ripple through us into the world beyond.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*

## Into One Spirit

*Ps 133; Jr 32:39; Ez 11:19; Jn 14:3, 16-26; 15:4-7; 16; 17:2-6, 11, 20-26; Ac 2:44-46; 4:32-37; Rm 14:1-15:6; 1Cor 1:10-17; 11:17-22; 12:1-14:40; Ep 4:1-16; Pp 2:1-5; 4:2-3; Tt 3:6-11; Hb 12:14-15; 1Jn 4:4-5:5*



*"...Keep them in Thy name that Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as We are one."<sup>79</sup> "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us, so that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me. The glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and Thou in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me and hast loved them even as Thou hast loved Me. Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, may be with Me wherever I am, to behold My glory which Thou hast given Me in Thy love for Me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world has not known Thee, but I have known Thee; and these know that Thou hast sent Me. I made known to them Thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which Thou hast loved Me may be in them, and I in them."<sup>80</sup>*

Jesus' intercessory prayer for believers of all time centers on the concept of unity. This is both the most extensive of Jesus' prayers recorded in the New Testament as well as His final prayer before going to Gethsemane. In this prayer, Jesus points to the intimate union of God in Christ as the model of unity among believers. This is the central tenet of Jesus' intercessory prayer on behalf of believers for all time. Union in Christ is a theme developed in John since chapter 10, though it is strengthened to a new level in chapters 14 and 15. Jesus speaks of this unity as a core element of the gospel message, for His call is to abide in Him<sup>81</sup>.

Jesus defines this unity in terms of relationship to Christ. Jesus qualifies the essence of the gospel he has preached and taught as being the gift of eternal life—a life of deep relationship with God<sup>82</sup>—and making known God's name—God's identity and character.<sup>83</sup> Belonging to Christ demands that we live in unity of purpose and love, even as Luke describes the life of the early church.<sup>84</sup>

With the call for unity, Jesus speaks of knowing God. This is not simply intellectual knowledge about God, but relational knowledge. Jesus links the concept of being "in" Him and "knowing" Him as two aspects of one reality.<sup>85</sup> The focal interest in knowing God is to be one with God, even as Jesus spoke of being one with the Father.<sup>86</sup> Jesus taught about God in order that

<sup>79</sup> John 17:11.

<sup>80</sup> John 17:20-26.

<sup>81</sup> John 14:3,16-17, 20, 23; 15:4-7.

<sup>82</sup> "And this is eternal life, that they know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." (John 17:3) This is the same concept of knowing as expressed by the wife who says, "If I know my husband...". It is knowing God's will from having repeatedly experienced God's will in many situations.

<sup>83</sup> John 17:2-6.

<sup>84</sup> Acts 2:44-46; 4:32-37.

<sup>85</sup> John 17:20-22.

<sup>86</sup> John 14:23-26.

believers might recognize that He had come from God and might accept Him as trustworthy, for one comes to God through confidence in Christ Jesus.

It is along these same lines of unity that Paul writes to the believers in Philippi. “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any motivation from love, any fellowship in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of like mind, having one love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility treat others as better than yourselves. Let no one look to personal interests, but guard the interests of others. Have this mindset among yourselves that you likewise have in Christ Jesus....”<sup>87</sup>

There are Biblical passages that call for unity of doctrine, practice, thought, and purpose. What we are prone to overlook is how Paul teaches us to live for unity despite differences of doctrine and practice. In Romans 14, Paul recognizes these differences. He also recognizes how Christians were allowing themselves to be inappropriately divided into two camps. In the context of this division, Paul calls believers to unity.

He speaks to two prevailing great issues of that day—the ritual observance of the Sabbath and eating meat that was sacrificed to idols. One group said the Sabbath must be observed, while the other said that every day must be held as dedicated unto God. One group said that one must protect witness by abstaining from any link to idolatry by eating no meat, while the other group said that idols were of no import and that God had made all food lawful in grace. Paul says that both groups were right and both were wrong!

He defends each position relative to the individual’s conscience. He does not allow for demanding that others conform to a particular definition of appropriate conduct or doctrinal opinion. Paul could have established a specific definition as authoritative, but instead he appeals for unity beyond the doctrinal and practical issues at hand. He enjoins believers not to force compliance with their definitions, but to grant one another respect for the positions they have adopted. They are to set aside their doctrinal disputes and unite under Christ in a spirit of love, grace, and fellowship. Believers are to join hands to announce Christ to the world.

Paul takes up this same motif in Ephesians, calling believers to make every effort to hold together in unity, recognizing the unity of faith, lordship, and peace to which we are called. As Paul calls believers to fight to remain united, he upholds the goal of becoming one as the body of Christ Jesus.<sup>88</sup> In writing Titus, Paul goes further in addressing the issues of doctrinal differences. He insists that Titus admonish those who cause divisions on the basis of quarrels regarding interpretations of the Law (whether this be traditional interpretation of Scripture or legal code is not quite clear), genealogies, or other points for dissension. Such a one is to be considered as heretical.<sup>89</sup>

The theme of Christian unity is not relegated to isolated passages. It is taught throughout the Bible.<sup>90</sup> Believers have not always lived up to this ideal of unity, but it is an ever-present aim to

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<sup>87</sup> Philippians 2:1-5.

<sup>88</sup> Ephesians 4:1-16.

<sup>89</sup> Titus 3:6-11.

<sup>90</sup> Psalm 133; Jeremiah 32:39; Ezekiel 11:19; Acts 4:32; Ephesians 4:1-6; Philippians 4:2-3; Hebrews 12:14-15.

seek. How accommodating can we be of those whose definitions differ from our own? Can we lay aside our differences and unite to fulfill God's mandate to disciple the nations?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*