

# The Priesthood of All Believers in Africa

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## Abstract

Protestant churches in Africa have come under scrutiny from political leaders due to the abuse that citizens in the churches suffer at the hands of their leaders. This is in part due to the loss of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers taught in the Bible and rediscovered during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. We trace the discovery of this doctrine in the Reformation, its application to Africa, and its current absence, and we call church leaders to teach this truth afresh to God's people.

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**I**t is not an overstatement to say that one of the greatest challenges facing the Christian church in sub-Saharan Africa today is the need to reclaim the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. If believers in Africa could appropriate afresh in faith and practice this great doctrine that was rediscovered during the Protestant Reformation, it would bring a check on the current spate of “prophets” who are wreaking havoc in many churches. For instance, here are two stories from local newspapers in Zambia.

Police in Chipata have arrested two clergymen of a named church for indecently assaulting two girls while praying for them. The *Zambian News Agency and Information Services* report from Chipata that Eastern Province Deputy Police Commissioner Alfred Nawa confirmed the incident in an interview today. The [Deputy Police Commissioner] named the duo as Prophet Misheck Ngalande and Pastor

Ben Banda.... Mr. Nawa says that the two were arrested yesterday, but the incident happened on April 25, this year, in the hills of Nabvutika compound, where the suspects were conducting prayers. He said one of the victims fled from the scene and reported the incident to the police. The duo has been charged with indecent assault and will appear in court soon (May 8, 2013).

A Lusaka based clergyman, who in 2012 impregnated at least ten women among his followers, has finally been divorced by his long-suffering wife. Bishop Emmanuel Chika of the Restoration Deliverance Church was sued by his wife for divorce after his “skirt evangelism” was published in the media in September 2012. His wife, Alice Kasonda, decided to end the marriage after seeing for herself the number of children the “pastor” has sired within the church. At the Chelstone local court, the wife also revealed the witchcraft Chika uses (July 8, 2013).

There are similar stories from South Africa. There was the news of a pastor who told his congregation to go outside and eat grass—and they did! Another pastor has recently been reported to give his church members snakes and mice to eat. And even more recently a pastor sprayed the insecticide DOOM on his congregants as a way of delivering them from whatever their problem was.

These are not the only cases that are rocking the church in Africa. The cases are so many that governments all across the continent are beginning to come up with legislation to arrest this trend. What is it that makes believers so vulnerable? It is that they sincerely believe that these pastors have access to God that they themselves or their fellow believers do not have. These “men of God” claim to be able to enter the spiritual realm and see the source of the difficulties that believers who come to them for help are going through. They also claim to have prayers that are powerful to bring about breakthroughs in the lives of those who come to them for help. What does the Bible teach about this issue?

## ***I. The Biblical Teaching***

The best place to start is in Jeremiah, where a major difference is announced between the old and new covenant:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer 31:31–34 ESV)

This pivotal text is quoted in the New Testament in order to make the point that one of the major differences between the New Testament and the Old is in the office of priest. In the Old Testament, there was an exclusive priesthood in the line of the tribe of Levi (Exod 40:13 and Num 1:47–54). They stood between God and his people. They alone worked in the temple and took sacrifices from the people to their God and, consequently, brought God's favor from God back to his people. Everyone else was warned to keep away. When King Saul made the mistake of offering a sacrifice because Samuel had delayed in coming to him, he was roundly rebuked. Being a king did not allow him a backdoor entry into the priesthood (1 Sam 13:8–15a).

However, when Jesus Christ came, and when he died, he removed this barrier (Rom 5:1–2). This was powerfully signified in the tearing of the curtain in the temple from top to bottom when Jesus breathed his last on the cross (Luke 23:45–46). The way into the holy of holies (also known as the most holy place) was now open. Any child of God could enter God's presence through the sacrifice of Christ, which he made as our high priest once for all when he died on the cross to pay the price for all our sins (Heb 10:12). There is no need for priests any more. Jesus has gone into the real holy of holies in heaven with his own blood as our high priest. That is the argument of the book of Hebrews (see especially Heb 9:11–12). It was written to show those Jewish believers being tempted under intense persecution to go back to Judaism that they were going back to something that was now obsolete. The earthly temple was now redundant because Jesus had gone into the real temple in heaven with his own blood. The priests were also now redundant because all believers were now priests.

As God said through Jeremiah, “No longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD.” The Holy Spirit dwells in each regenerate child of God, enabling all to know God at a personal level. This does not negate the need for teaching, but it means that all can sense whether what we are being taught about God and his ways is true or false. We can read our Bibles and understand what is being taught there. We do not need to be blind followers of others. We can actively participate in spiritual things and be stewards of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ on earth. We know the Lord!

In Exodus 19:6, God said to the people of Israel that he had rescued from Egypt, “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” This was later fully applied to the New Testament church in passages such as 1 Peter 2:5, 9 and Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6. All believers are to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ because all have

access to God through him (Eph 2:17; Rom 5:2). Sacrifices are in terms of a broken heart, prayer, and praise. As Albert Mohler puts it,

the doctrine of the priesthood of believers thus affirms the right of every believer to fellowship with God through Christ, and the obligation of every believer to be a fully functioning member of a congregation, exercising Christian discipleship among the fellowship of other believer-priests.<sup>1</sup>

This is the biblical teaching of the priesthood of all believers. Indeed, it is a most liberating teaching. It causes believers to prayerfully and actively use their minds to responsibly seek God and his will for them and for their church, rather than mindlessly trusting someone else to do that for them.

## **II. The Teaching Lost in the Medieval Era**

Sadly, despite the clarity in the Bible concerning the priesthood of all believers, this teaching was largely lost in the medieval era through the emergence of a priestly caste in the church. This happened through the erection of a barrier between ordinary believers (the laity) and those who ministered God's word to them (the clergy). The Lord's Supper became a sacrifice that the priests were enacting. Sacerdotalism was born, and ministers claimed supernatural powers to dispense the grace of God through the sacraments, which gave them control over the laity. W. J. Moulder writes,

Clement, writing in the last decade of the 1st cent., speaks of the Christian ministry as high priest, priest, and Levite (1 Clem. 40–44); the Didache (13:3) calls Christian prophets “your high priests” and refers to the Eucharist as a sacrifice. ... About A.D. 200 Tertullian (*De baptismo* 17) and Hippolytus (Preface to *Refutatio omnium haeresium*) in the West called Christian ministers “priests” and “high priests.”<sup>2</sup>

The Bible was kept in the Latin language, which only the priests and the few educated people could understand. Consequently, ignorance of the Bible's content became widespread. The priests alone knew its contents. The common understanding—especially in the Roman Catholic Church, even until the time of Vatican II—was that the ordinary people would be confused and misled if they were allowed to read the Bible in their own mother tongue. Thus any attempt to translate the Bible into the language of the common man was opposed, and those who tried to do so were persecuted

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<sup>1</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Priesthood of Believers,” in Chad Brand et al., eds., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1328.

<sup>2</sup> W. J. Moulder, “Priesthood in the NT,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–1988), 3:965.

and killed. The Latin Vulgate remained the sole translation of the Bible allowed to be read in churches for many years.

The priests alone could administer the sacraments, and the people went to them to have their sins absolved. They were seen as having a special relationship with God that no one else in the church had. At least that was the claim. The people of God simply had to believe what they were told by those who were in this unique category and were hearing directly from God—the priests. The people also went to them for all the sacraments—baptism, the Eucharist, marriage, and so on. Only the priests, and in some cases only the bishop, could administer these.

This dependence on the priests was unhealthy and unbiblical. The people of God, though inside the church, were alienated from the church in terms of being responsible for what was going on there. They were merely guests and visitors in need of being ministered to by those who had this special relationship with God. Once corruption entered the hierarchy, there was no safeguard against it among the people (the laity). This was what happened in the period leading to the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Thankfully, in the Reformation the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was rediscovered and faithfully taught and applied.

### **III. *The Teaching Rediscovered in the Reformation***

One of the greatest battles to be won during the Protestant Reformation was that of liberating the people of God from the stranglehold and domination of the Roman Catholic clergy. A major weapon in the armory of the Reformers was a return to the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. According to Jon Wood,

As early as 1523, Luther and Zwingli made similar arguments in the matter. A broad range of theological, social, and political ramifications quickly became apparent. Local communities often became more empowered in matters of church life and discipline, even to the theoretical extent of dismissing corrupt clergy and electing suitable ministers of their own.<sup>3</sup>

The newfound freedom would have resulted in chaos were it not for the efforts made by magisterial Reformers like John Calvin who instituted mature church leadership led by lay elders in order to guide the people of God.

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<sup>3</sup> Jon Wood, “Priesthood of Believers,” in David M. Whitford, *T&T Clark Companion to Reformation Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 443.

The Reformers, at great risk to their lives, translated the Bible into the common language of the people. They strongly believed that any regenerate child of God with the Holy Spirit could understand the Scriptures by simply reading them and thus come to know the mind and will of God for their lives and for the church of which they were a part. Indeed, as William Tyndale said to an English cleric, “If God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plow shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.” Or as Erasmus writes in the preface of his Greek NT, “I would to God that the plowman would sing a text of the Scripture at his plow and that the weaver would hum them to the tune of his shuttle.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the Reformers translated the Scriptures and made them available to anyone. With the souls of believers thus liberated, there was an exodus from the Roman Catholic Church into what has since come to be known as Protestant churches. Alan Cairns writes,

It was one of the great accomplishments of the Reformation to sweep away this monstrous system and to proclaim that sinners have direct access to God through the merits of Christ to obtain from him directly the saving grace they need, and that saints have unrestricted access to the throne of grace, without any sacerdotal intrusion by any man.<sup>5</sup>

#### **IV. *The Implications of This in Africa***

As Christianity came to Africa, the various Protestant missionaries who brought the Christian faith would have known the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and would have taught it to their new converts. Christians would have known even in those early years that they have direct access to God through the finished work of his Son on the cross. However, the missionaries applied the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers slightly differently in their churches, depending on their form of church government. So, for instance, those churches that had an episcopal form of church government (e.g., the Anglicans) would involve the laity less than those with a congregational form of church government (e.g., the Baptists), and those with the Presbyterian form were somewhere in the middle.

In an indirect way, when Protestant Christianity was brought to Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the doctrine of the priesthood of

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<sup>4</sup> As quoted by Tony Lane in “A Man for All People: Introducing William Tyndale,” *Christian History* 6 (16). 4 (1987): 7. Cf. Desiderius Erasmus, “An Exhortation to the Diligent Study of Scripture,” *Unio cum Christo* 2.2 (October 2016): 19.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 343.

all believers is what led the overseas missionaries to start involving new indigenous converts in the administration of local church affairs and to hand over leadership of the churches to indigenous lay leaders. Those missionaries who recognized this doctrine at a practical level, believing that the same Holy Spirit who guided the church overseas would also guide the church in Africa, acted without waiting for indigenous leaders to reach the level of understanding that their own church leadership overseas had reached.

Those missionaries who recognized the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers only at an intellectual level were more hesitant and ended up with serious power struggles between themselves and indigenous converts. Even where they handed over some church power, they still preferred to remain on top of the leadership structures. The understanding of the indigenous converts of their equality with missionaries arising from the priesthood of all believers propelled them to demand an equal say in church life, resulting in leadership conflicts. This has been a common phenomenon across Africa in the last fifty to sixty years.

If during the Reformation the teaching of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers resulted in social and political upheavals, it was the same in Africa. Since many of the Pan-African political leaders in the middle of the twentieth century were educated in mission schools, the teaching of universal priesthood had social and political ramifications. Indirectly, it gave rise to the fight for political independence that took place in many nations across Africa. Missionaries were also feeling the pressure being felt by colonial masters. Those missionaries who were hanging on to church power were seen as enemies of church progress. Many were forced to leave the field and go back to their countries for safety and with real frustration.

## ***V. The Teaching Lost Again in Africa***

If we are to understand how the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has been largely lost in Protestantism in Africa, we must go back about a hundred years to the Pentecostal movement that started with the Azusa Street phenomenon in California in the USA. This movement emphasized the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, speaking in tongues, miraculous healings, and prophecy. It taught that every Christian should undergo a “baptism of the Spirit” as a postconversion experience, the proof of it being speaking in tongues and empowerment for Christian service.

When missionaries first brought Christianity to the African continent, some African prophets with charismatic powers arose in their ranks. These included prophets like William Wadé Harris of the Gold Coast (now Ghana),

Garrick Sokari Braide of the Niger Delta, Simon Kimbangu of the Congo, Isaiah Shembe of South Africa, Lenshina of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), and others. The missionaries did not accept them in the churches because they were syncretistic, mixing Christianity with African traditional religions. Hence, by the middle of the twentieth century, these prophets were few and were outside the mainline churches.

There has been a change in Protestant Christianity in the last fifty years all across Africa. Many overseas missionaries handed over the denominations in the 1950s and 1960s to indigenous leaders even as the colonial masters were handing over political leadership to indigenous political leaders. This was good and a positive thing, but in many cases the new leaders were not ready to handle the challenges that claims to the miraculous gifts would bring to the church.

The Pentecostal movement (the Assemblies of God, Apostolic Faith Mission, and the Full Gospel Church) arrived from overseas in the 1960s and 1970s teaching Spirit baptism with the evidence of tongues and calling people to be prayed for. There were also prophecies, visions, healing, deliverances, and miracles in general. Initially these remained within the Pentecostal denominations. However, the mainline churches began to be affected as some of their members aspired to see similar phenomena in their churches. When they resisted the change, many of them lost members who joined the Pentecostal denominations.

By the 1980s a neo-Pentecostal (or Charismatic) movement grew out of the splits. Indirectly, this was a fruit of an understanding of the priesthood of all believers, not as a well-articulated doctrinal position but rather as a culture of “we are the church.” If all believers can understand the Bible and if all have access to God through Christ’s finished atoning work on the cross, why should they be entrapped in established Pentecostal denominational structures? After all, the major Pentecostal denominations also started as independent churches when their founders left established churches that were not responding positively to the Pentecostal phenomenon. So in the last few decades this “we are the church” culture has resulted in many independent Charismatic churches mushrooming across Africa, especially in the major cities.

This is where the problem has begun to be evident—in the new churches. The neo-Pentecostal or Charismatic movement, which has become widespread in Africa and across the world, has tended to make each congregation a one-man show. The universal emphasis is on the “man of God” who is anointed with divine power to deliver people from such things as delay in marriage, joblessness, miscarriages, divorce, poverty, and disease. Often he



is also the founder of his church, having come up with the church's name, the meeting place and times, the structure, and the other leaders, and the church's offerings go to him. In many cases, this "man of God" makes his wife the second in command.

This has led to the loss of the priesthood of all believers at two levels. At the first level, it is the alienation of the ordinary church members from church responsibility and ownership. They have no say in any major decisions in the church, not even how the money they give in church is to be spent. The clergy/laity divide is very clear. Its conspicuousness is made more evident because on the clergy side there is only one person—the "man of God"—and everyone else is for all practical purposes on the laity side. As the saying goes, "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely," and so in many of these churches scandals in the lives of the "men of God" have come out, and church members have been helpless to do anything about it. They have instead been told that if they do not like what is going on they should be the ones to leave. "This is my church," the embattled leader often says. So, these leaders are above church discipline while they themselves can discipline anyone. This is certainly a loss of the priesthood of all believers.

At the second level, the loss of the priesthood of all believers is seen in the alienation of ordinary church members because they realize that they too have as much access to God as the "man of God." Whereas at the beginnings of the Pentecostal movement the extraordinary gifts were supposed to be spread across the membership of the church, the neo-Pentecostal movement inadvertently embodies all of them in the "man of God"—except, perhaps, the gift of speaking in tongues. He is the one God talks to about the future of the church and the cause of problems in the lives of those who go to him for help. He is the one who prophesies. He is the one whose prayers are powerful to the pulling down of strongholds and whose prayers bring breakthroughs (cf. 2 Cor 10:4). All other church members can only bring the needy to the "man of God" to be prayed for. The common language in such church circles is, "Come to my church. My pastor prays for people with such problems." Ordinary church members have lost the conviction that because every believer's access to God is mediated through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross they have as much access to God as their pastor. This is certainly a very serious loss of the priesthood of all believers.

Whereas the Pentecostal movement has spread to all continents, the loss of the priesthood of all believers is especially critical in Africa and Asia. This is because of the close proximity of believers on these two continents to the spiritual world outside the Christian faith. Thus a new sacerdotalism has

been born, with a new generation of pastors calling themselves by names such as apostles and prophets, who are claiming to have supernatural powers and are bringing God's people under their unbiblical control.

This is where the abuse I referred to at the start of this article is found. God's people, not knowing that they do not need a human intermediary and not knowing that they have equal access to God through Christ, go to "apostles" and "prophets" to be prayed for so that they can be delivered from whatever is depriving them of joy. They go to them in precisely the same way that their relatives in the village go to the witch doctors. They believe everything they are told by the "men of God." They accept any method these men tell them to use in order to be delivered—including giving money and even having sex with them.

How can African believers be so gullible? It is because of traditional African religious spirituality. Africans are not natural atheists and have always believed in some divine being whose benevolence brings good fortune in human life. However, African religious belief is that this divine being is far away. Between him and us lie two impregnable layers of spirits—the spirits of those who have already died and the angelic beings. The average person cannot break through these layers to get to God and receive his blessing. A mediator is needed to break through these layers. Outside the Christian faith the village witch doctor rules and claims to have such powers. In the Christian church the "man of God" has taken the place of the village witch doctor. Due to the fact that both situations are built on the belief system of African religious spirituality, African Christians easily play into the hands of those who give them the impression that they have this exclusive access to God and the spiritual realm that they themselves do not have. They do not realize that the God who was far away from them because of their sin has now been brought near through the cross of Christ. Christ is in God's presence now as their mediator. They do not need another mediator. They have access to God and so do other ordinary church members who can also pray for them. Somehow the ongoing need for another human being who has been given power to break through the impregnable layers lurks at the back of the minds of Africans—whether converted to Christianity or not. This is what makes African believers gullible. The only way they can be guarded against this is for the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers to be taught again in the churches all across the continent.

## **VI. *The Need to Restore This Teaching***

It is our prayer that church leaders in Africa may proclaim to their followers the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and safeguard them from the darkness that has began to engulf Protestantism at the start of the twenty-first century. That political authorities are beginning to say, “Enough is enough!” should be a cause of serious concern for all of us. We need to put our house in order before others do it for us. When political leaders start meddling with the church, the church loses its prophetic role in society, as history has shown. We must not let this happen.

This abuse of God’s people will only be arrested by a full-orbed display and restoration of the biblical teaching of the priesthood of all believers in the churches across the continent of Africa. It is a clear teaching in the Bible, promised in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New Testament after the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the right of all the people of God and results in stronger churches. The five-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation is a good time for us to dust off this teaching and put it on display for all God’s children to see and apply to their lives and the lives of their churches.