



# Priestly People

## Christopher B. Harbin

### 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:1-10

What is the church? Why are we here? Why do we exist? We all know that being the church is so much more than showing up on Sunday mornings, going to Bible study, praying, bringing our tithes to support our ministries in the community and beyond. We know that being the church is much more than tracking our attendance and participation in worship, Sunday school, Wednesday evening activities and more. It goes beyond our work at Lydia's Loft, God's Garden, World Hunger, and The Bin. So why does it so often seem that we punch in at this place we call church, record our presence, and then check out to get on with our lives? What is it that we often miss like that fleeting word on the tip of the tongue?

It's been a while since I walked into a church service or Sunday school class, sat down and just listened and joined in the congregational singing. It's been a much longer time since that would have seemed normal to me.

My birth as a pastor's son was announced during Sunday school that morning I first breathed. Being in church is one of my earliest memories and such a natural part of life, even if the churches in which I have participated have been very diverse. I recognized God's call on my life for missionary service as a young teen. I figured that on going to college I would take a break, sit back, and take in what church had to offer before I headed off to seminary and fulltime ministry.

Someone has said, "If you want to hear God laugh, tell him your plans." That pretty much wraps up how those plans worked. I got to college, went around to various churches in search of a good music program I could enjoy. Two months later, I found myself singing in the choir of a smaller downtown church, teaching the retired men's Sunday school class, and directing the church training program. By summer, I was serving as minister of music in a country church forty-five minutes from Mississippi College. Sitting back and taking it in did not give me the comfort, peace, and sense of belonging I had sought. I found that after having served in a church during high school, working with partnership missions teams, and leading Sunday school classes I could not be filled without first offering of myself.

Soaking it up, as I had planned to do, did not fill me. It simply left me empty and dry. God had called me to participate in the mission set before the church. Simply receiving what others had to offer did not satisfy me as I was expecting it to. The gospel just does not work that way. It is not about receiving in order to be fulfilled. It is rather about giving all we have in order that all God has might flow through us, enriching our lives in the process of blessing others.

I was looking for a church to fill me, offering me what I needed. What I quickly found was that my need was not to be filled by someone else pouring into me. What I really needed was to get on with the task set before the church, to share God's gifts with others. My filling and wholeness would come about as a byproduct of service.

That is the same issue Peter addresses here in his letter. There is a much greater purpose of God in calling us into becoming a people, the nation of God. That purpose has nothing to do with politics, national boundaries, or even national identity, rights, or freedoms. Instead, it has to do with the purpose to which we are called, the mission set before us. Our identity and well-being are not tied to what we might receive from others when we gather. It is rather about what God can give others through us.

When my father first asked me to serve as minister of music, I was too young. I was only a senior in high school. I was unprepared. I was scared of the responsibility. I was insecure about being placed as the leader of a choir of which I would be the youngest member. Then he reminded me I had been in choirs, excellent choirs, all my life. I knew the basics of leading congregational singing. I would be the only one in the choir who could read music or had ever participated in a choir before. I had something to give, because I had already received more than many others.

I learned more about music that year than my choir learned. They came along well, but I was the one who grew the most. They received something from me, but, as they returned to the congregation what they received, they grew as well. Like the disciples being sent on mission by Jesus during his earthly ministry, I did not feel prepared or ready. Then again, God's mission has never been about our capabilities, our talents, or our strength. It is about what God can do in us, through us, and even in spite of us.

We are called to bear witness, not to our abilities, but to the goodness and grace of God. We are not called to be the answer to a dying and hurting world. Rather, we are called to point the world to God, for it is in God, in Christ Jesus, that the answers are to be found. As Peter puts it, we are called, as a people, to be priestly. A priestly people is not necessarily all that special in themselves: they are special in their function. They serve as mediators between the larger community and God. They allow God to flow through them in ways they would be incapable of accomplishing on their own.

The call, this mission given us as God's priestly people set apart on a mission, is about so much more than showing up to be counted. It is about so much more than writing a check for the offering plate. It is about so much more than gathering for prayer and Bible study and singing. It is about so much more than running the organization of the church. It is about assuming responsibility for the task set before us. It is about representing Christ before the world.

The task starts here. It begins with our interactions within this body. It begins with our assuming responsibility for what we do together as a local church, an expression of God's presence here in this community. It begins by saying to ourselves, "What happens here is up to me. The good, the bad, and the ugly around me are mine to own. I will be responsible for God's mission set before us."

Someone else could do it. There are many God might use. That is not the issue. If I am part of this people called of God to become a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, the question to ponder is not the role of another, but my own. It is up to me to yearn for the growth God is ready to give. It is up to me to accept what God has in store. It is up to me to become filled with the things of God that my life might overflow in ministry to others. It is up to me to accept the responsibility and call to become part of this priestly people, mediating God before the community and world in which I live.

It is to this end we have been chosen and called. We are tasked with reflecting God and God's presence in the world round about. Once we were not a people, but God has called us into existence as a special people with a special purpose.

Are we ready to take up the mantle, the mission, the call set before us? As long as we wait for someone else to come along and do what must be done, we limit what can be accomplished. As long as we wait for some other to fill us, we will never be truly filled. As long as we sit back while others take up the cause of Christ, we are the ones who fail to receive the blessings of God's call. It is time we became the priestly people we were designed to become.

\*\_\*\_\*