

# What is the Priesthood of Believers?



Basics of  
the Faith

S E R I E S

A. Craig Troxel

# What Is the Priesthood of Believers?

## **Basics of the Faith**

- How Do We Glorify God?* by John D. Hannah  
*How Our Children Come to Faith* by Stephen Smallman  
*Is Jesus in the Old Testament?* by Iain M. Duguid  
*What Are Election and Predestination?* by Richard D. Phillips  
*What Are Spiritual Gifts?* by Vern S. Poythress  
*What Happens after Death?* by Richard D. Phillips  
*What Is a Reformed Church?* by Stephen Smallman  
*What Is a True Calvinist?* by Philip Graham Ryken  
*What Is Biblical Preaching?* by Eric J. Alexander  
*What Is Discipleship?* by Stephen Smallman  
*What Is Faith?* by Guy M. Richard  
*What Is Grace?* by Sean Michael Lucas  
*What Is Hell?* by Christopher W. Morgan and  
Robert A. Peterson  
*What Is Justification by Faith Alone?* by J. V. Fesko  
*What Is Providence?* by Derek Thomas  
*What Is Spiritual Warfare?* by Stanley D. Gale  
*What Is the Christian Worldview?* by Philip Graham Ryken  
*What Is the Lord's Supper?* by Richard D. Phillips  
*What Is the Priesthood of Believers?* by Craig A. Troxel  
*What Is the Trinity?* by David F. Wells  
*What Is True Conversion?* by Stephen Smallman  
*Why Do We Baptize Infants?* by Bryan Chapell  
*Why God Gave Us a Book* by Gene Edward Veith

See all the booklets in the Basics of the Faith series at  
[www.prpbooks.com](http://www.prpbooks.com).

# What Is the Priesthood of Believers?

A. Craig Troxel



PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

**R&R**  
P U B L I S H I N G  
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2019 Westminster Theological Seminary

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Westminster Seminary Press, LLC, a Pennsylvania Limited Liability Company, is a wholly owned subsidiary of Westminster Theological Seminary.

This work is a co-publication between P&R Publishing and Westminster Seminary Press, LLC.

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Troxel, A. Craig, 1961- author.

Title: What is the priesthood of believers? / A. Craig Troxel.

Description: Phillipsburg : P&R Publishing, 2019. | Series: Basics of the faith

Identifiers: LCCN 2019008817 | ISBN 9781596389649 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781596389656 (epub) | ISBN 9781596389663 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Priesthood, Universal.

Classification: LCC BT767.5 .T76 2019 | DDC 234--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019008817>

Toward the conclusion of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, the hero, Jean Valjean, is lying in bed as he slowly slips into death, surrounded by his "daughter," Cosette; her husband, Marius; and a doctor. An elderly woman who has been viewing this scene through a half-closed door is so moved by the sight that she can no longer contain her religious zeal and cries out to Valjean, "Do you want a priest?" He raises his arm and points above his head, where you would have thought he saw someone, and answers, "I have one."

Christian readers immediately comprehend the religious significance of this closing vignette from Hugo's masterpiece—although from different perspectives. To a Roman Catholic it portrays a dying man's ill-advised refusal of "last rites" by a priest. To a Protestant it depicts the conviction that the priestly ministry of Christ is sufficient and needs no earthly supplement, and thus illustrates the importance of the Reformation doctrine, the "priesthood of all believers."<sup>1</sup>

The treasured legacy of the priesthood of all believers (also known as the "universal priesthood") has rich implications for the believer, including whether or not one needs an earthly priest at death. But all such implications hinge upon a more fundamental doctrine, the priesthood of Christ.

## THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST

How doth Christ execute the office of a priest?

Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine

justice, and reconcile us to God; and in making continual intercession for us. (Westminster Shorter Catechism 25)

## **The Intercession of Christ at the Cross**

The entirety of Christ's priestly ministry for his church can be essentially summarized as one of intercession. He intercedes first at the cross in his state of humiliation, and second he intercedes at the throne of majesty in his state of exaltation.

When Christ offered up himself on the cross for sinners, he fulfilled the priestly ministry and sacrificial system that God instituted in the Old Testament. Simply put, a priest is "one who brings men near to God, who leads them into the presence of God."<sup>2</sup> The priest "brought" men into God's presence because he entered the holy place as the representative of the people. This representation was symbolized by the beautiful ephod that the high priest wore with a stone attached to each shoulder piece, each engraved with six of the names of Israel's twelve tribes (Ex. 28:9). More importantly, this representation required a close identification between the priest and the people, namely, that they share the same nature. As Hebrews 5:1 states, "For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins." This is why the human nature of Christ as priest is emphasized in the book of Hebrews. His humanity, no less than his divinity, equips him to perform his priestly ministry: "Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17).

Preeminent among the sacrifices and feasts was the annual Day of Atonement when the high priest exercised his most sobering and privileged sacerdotal role by entering the Holy of Holies (or “Most Holy Place”). Although Christ fulfilled other sacrificial rites and ceremonies, the book of Hebrews focuses particularly upon the Day of Atonement to explain the significance of Christ’s mediation.<sup>3</sup> On the Day of Atonement the high priest slaughtered sacrificial animals as sin offerings outside the sanctuary—a bull for him and his family, and later the first of two goats for Israel. Next he took some of the blood from each of the animals into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled the blood onto the mercy seat to atone for the sin of all the people.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, the high priest confessed the sins of Israel as he laid his hands on the second goat, which was released into the wilderness bearing the iniquities of Israel.

Christ fulfills this feast and other sacrifices as both the priest who ministers and as the sacrifice that is offered. First, Christ administers the sacrifice as a priest—he is the one who offered the sacrifice (Gal. 2:20; Heb. 7:27; 9:14). He was not forced to give himself, but he humbled himself and laid down his life willingly out of love for his church (John 10:18; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:2, 25; Phil. 2:8). He said, “I lay down my life. . . . No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (John 10:17–18). Second, Christ is the sacrificial victim—the unblemished Lamb who bore the curse of sin for the people that he has redeemed. In particular, it is his blood that atones for the forgiveness of sin, because “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 9:22). And it is his blood that, as propitiation, covers the offense of sin and swallows up the wrath of God.



## **The Intercession of Christ at the Throne of Grace**

After Christ made purification for sins, he rose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Majesty on high. In his ascension Christ passed through the heavens and entered behind the veil (Heb. 4:14). Just like the sacrificial animals on the Day of Atonement, Christ also was sacrificed “outside the sanctuary,” that is, outside heaven, which is the true sanctuary. But now in his exaltation Christ brings the blood of the sacrifice into the inner sanctuary and opens the veil of the heavenly Holy of Holies. Just as the veil of the earthly temple was torn from top to bottom when Christ was sacrificed upon the cross, so now the Most Holy Place in heaven has been opened for us as Christ has entered behind the veil. Christ has entered the sanctuary of heaven for us, bearing our nature, to obtain access for us to the throne of grace in the immediate presence of God. Through Christ then, every Christian may “have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh” (Heb. 10:19–20).

Christ appears before the Father in our nature to actively continue his priestly ministry. He sits at the right hand of the Father as our advocate and representative, constantly testifying to the verdict won by his death and resurrection (1 John 2:1). Christ can plead the church’s case in the court of heaven and answer all accusations that are brought against her. And as the church prays to her great High Priest, she prays to one who sympathizes with our weaknesses, because he too was tempted but is without sin (Heb. 4:15–16). Christ appears at the right hand of Majesty fully equipped for his priestly ministry by right of his two natures of humanity

and divinity, and his two states of humiliation and exaltation. As the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable God, who became flesh, Christ "is able to save [us] to the uttermost" because "he always lives to make intercession" for us (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:34). That is to say, his priestly intercession in heaven endures in superlative glory and excellence.<sup>5</sup>

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF CHRIST'S PRIESTHOOD FOR THE PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS

Broadly speaking there are two implications of Christ's priestly ministry for the doctrine of the priesthood of believers. One has to do with Christ as a priest; the other has to do with Christ as a sacrifice.

Christ's priestly ministry is perfection embodied. It is utterly unique, unsurpassed and unending, and never in need of supplementation or succession. It brings to an end the priestly order of Aaron, because Christ surpasses it in every way—according to the book of Hebrews, it is "better." Christ's priestly ministry guarantees a "better covenant," which is founded on "better promises" and purifies with a "better sacrifice" and blood that speaks a "better word"; and therefore we have a "better hope" and long for a "better country" with a "better possession" and a "better life."<sup>6</sup> In this sense his ministry is comparatively more excellent than the priesthood of the old covenant.

Moreover, Christ's priestly ministry is also superlatively excellent. In this sense Christ fulfills the ministry pictured in the unique Old Testament figure of Melchizedek,