

# 8

## Equipping Churches

UWE SWARAT

ONE OF THE CORE practices of Baptists may be called equipping. It means that Baptist believers serve one another to grow in faith, love, and hope and to build up the church, especially in the local context. As the New Testament says, Jesus Christ has equipped each Christian with a spiritual gift, with which he or she can and should serve the others (1 Cor 12:7ff), “so that the church may be built up” (1 Cor 14:5). These gifts and duties constitute the equal authority of each believer. For this concept Baptists usually take from Scripture and tradition the phrase “priesthood of all believers.” To the gifts of Christ to the church belong also varieties of service (1 Cor 12:5) or ministries, which Christ gives, as Eph. 4:11ff says, “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” So, the mutual equipping of the church members is encouraged through special, Christ-given ministries. This raises the question whether according to the mind of Christ the church should have an official, hierarchical priesthood, as Catholic and Orthodox teachers believe, or if the church should be arranged according to the universal priesthood of the believers.

As this is a crucial question in ecumenical dialogues, we will explain in the following the Baptist understanding of the priesthood of all believers. In the first step, we will introduce this concept as one of the Baptist distinctive principles; in the second, we will present Martin Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, which has been the historical paradigm

## EQUIPPING CHURCHES

for the corresponding Baptist concept; in the third, we will approach the question of how the priesthood of all believers relates to the ministry of pastors and elders; and in the fourth and last step, we will look at how the priesthood of all believers is treated in *TCTCV*.

### The Priesthood of All Believers as a Baptist Distinctive

The expression of “Baptist principles” or “Baptist distinctives” arose among Baptists towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> A generally agreed listing of these distinctive principles has never existed, because they should never override the Baptist confessions. The listing of distinctives should demonstrate the historically rooted profile of the Baptists among the plurality of Christian denominations. W. M. S. West has stressed that Baptists hold in common with all Christians the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. And: “Baptist Principles are particular interpretations, understandings and emphases of that one great Christian faith.”<sup>2</sup>

The priesthood of all believers is often specified as one of these Baptist distinctive principles.<sup>3</sup> Some actually consider this concept as “the keystone truth for Baptists,”<sup>4</sup> as “central to Baptist thought,”<sup>5</sup> or as “a core principle of Baptist doctrine.”<sup>6</sup> Already the first confession of Baptists in history, the “Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles” by John Smyth (1609), though not using the phrase “priesthood of all believers,” gives expression to this concept in article 13:

That the church of Christ has power delegated to themselves of announcing the word, administering the sacraments, appointing

1. E.g., Williams, *Principles and Practices*; Pendleton, *Distinctive Principles of Baptists*; cf. Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 531ff.

2. West, *Baptist Principles*, 5.

3. E.g., BWA, *We Baptists*, 28ff; Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden, “Was wir glauben”; Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec, “What Do Baptists Believe?” Cf. West, *Baptist Principles*; Shurden, *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision*; Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 13–35; Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 40–43; Norman, *More Than Just Name*, 45ff, 132–34, 144–46; Norman, *Baptist Way*, 94–99; Tooze, *Baptist Principles*, 129–52; and Pinson, “Baptists.”

4. Truett, “Baptist Message,” 113.

5. Shurden, *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision*, 2ff.

6. Blevins, “Priesthood of All Believers.”

## EQUIPPING CHURCHES

ministers, disclaiming them, and also excommunicating; but the last appeal is to the brethren or body of the church.<sup>7</sup>

In his own writings, Smyth states that the believers through Christ are made spiritual priests to offer spiritual sacrifices. They have all power of the priesthood immediately from Christ by virtue of the covenant God makes with them. Therefore, even if a congregation has no ordained persons among it, it nevertheless has power to preach, administer the Holy Communion, excommunicate, and absolve.<sup>8</sup> The Methodist historian Cyril Eastwood has found: “The doctrine of the priesthood of believers is not incidental but central in Baptist Theology.”<sup>9</sup> It explains the Baptist doctrine of the church and the ministry, the Baptist position in relation to the state, and Baptist teaching on Holy Communion.

### **Martin Luther’s Concept of the Priesthood of All Believers as Adopted by Baptists**

In an ecumenical perspective it is notable that Baptists adopted this doctrine—most likely mediated through Puritan teachings—from Martin Luther and have put it into practice, perhaps more consistently than some Lutheran churches did.<sup>10</sup> In any case, this doctrine, among some others, forms a close bond between Baptists and the Lutheran reformation.<sup>11</sup>

Luther taught that not only persons consecrated by bishops are priests but all Christians.<sup>12</sup> For him this is a result not only of the clear witness of Holy Scripture (1 Pet 2:4–10; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6) but also of the nature of the church as a communion of saints, i.e., a congregation of true believers.

7. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 91–95.

8. Smyth, *Works of John Smyth*, 2:737, cited in Eastwood, *Priesthood of All Believers*, 155.

9. Eastwood, *Priesthood of All Believers*, 160.

10. Bakker, “We Are All Equal.”

11. See George, “Reformation Roots,” and Swarat, “What Baptists Have Learned.”

12. Luther presented his concept of the priesthood of all believers several times, e.g., “An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung” (1520), in Luther, *Deutsch-Deutsche Studienausgabe*, 3:1–135; “De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae” (1520), in Luther, *Lateinisch-Deutsche Studienausgabe*, 3:173–375; “De instituendis ministris ecclesiae” (1523), in Luther, *Lateinisch-Deutsche Studienausgabe*, 3:575–647. I shall try to briefly summarize his remarks with the help of Wendebourg, “Kirche,” 409ff; Goertz, *Allgemeines Priestertum*; and Althaus, *Theologie Martin Luthers*, 270–75, 279–83.

## EQUIPPING CHURCHES

Each and every believer is a priest: man or woman, young or old, lord and lady or servant and maid, scholar or layperson. This is founded in their faith, through which they participate in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Their ordination to the priesthood is nothing else than their baptism. Through faith and baptism every Christian may “confidently approach the throne of grace” (Heb 4:16) without any mediation of a priest except of Christ himself; every Christian has direct access to and immediate communion with God. There is no need for a proxy apart from Jesus Christ. No one can believe in place of another one. There is no place for a hierarchy (holy authority) that mediates between God and the people of God.

Included in this priestly status of every Christian is an obligation, according to Luther, namely the task of serving others as a priest. Being a priest means acting as a representative for others before God, offering sacrifices to God, and proclaiming the word of God to others. In this sense, Jesus Christ became priest for us all, and in this sense all Christians should sacrifice themselves for others, pray for them, and tell God’s word to them. Every Christian thus metaphorically becomes a priest for others. Included in this priesthood of all believers is the spiritual authority and fundamental right of every Christian to preach, to baptize, to administer the Lord’s Supper, to listen to the confession of others, and to judge all doctrine and spirits. Luther makes what in the Catholic Church is reserved for the ordained priests to a right and a commission for all Christians.

Baptists used to take both aspects seriously—the privilege of being a priest personally and the obligation of being a priest for others—laying the stress sometimes on the first, sometimes on the second. The gift of direct access to God for every single Christian includes the right to read and interpret the Bible for themselves and to follow their own conscience. This understanding has sometimes been called “soul competency”<sup>13</sup> or “soul freedom.”<sup>14</sup> It follows from this that the church *has* no priesthood but *is* a priesthood. All church members partake in the ministry of the church—equipped by the Holy Spirit with manifold gifts.<sup>15</sup> There is a fundamental spiritual equality between the church members. Therefore, a local church is governed neither by a bishop nor by an elder or a group of elders but by the

13. Most prominently by Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*. Timothy George said, in contrast, that soul competency is the natural capacity of all human beings for God and has nothing to do with the priesthood of all believers (George, “Priesthood of All Believers”).

14. Shurden, *Baptist Identity*, 23–32; cf. Shurden, *Doctrine of the Priesthood*.

15. Cf. Rees, “Worship of All Believers.”

## EQUIPPING CHURCHES

church members themselves (Congregationalism instead of Episcopalianism and Presbyterianism).

### **The Priesthood of All Believers and the Ministry of Pastors and Elders**

If all Christians are priests and are endowed with the same authority and spiritual powers as the priests, bishops, and popes in the Roman Catholic church then inevitably the question arises, why is there an ordained ministry in Baptist churches at all? Is the ordination of some Christians not a contradiction to the priesthood of all believers? This question has not always been put clearly enough among Baptists. Often they have been satisfied with stating that Baptists have both: an ordained ministry and the priesthood of all believers.<sup>16</sup> On that background it became possible for the Southern Baptists at their Convention in June 1988 in San Antonio, Texas, to adopt a resolution that declared the “priesthood of the believer” as a marginal, mistakable, and misapplied doctrine, and resolved that it in no way contradicts the role, responsibility, and authority of the pastor.<sup>17</sup> This resolution discloses a severe lack of clarity about the relationship between the ministry of a pastor and the universal priesthood of the believers.<sup>18</sup>

On this matter it cannot hurt to listen again to Luther. Luther argues that there should be particular ministries in the congregation of priests, in order to avoid chaos, should all members of the congregation want to preach or lead the Lord’s Supper at the same time. This point of good order is important not only for practical reasons but also for a specific theological reason, that is, for the sake of the universal priesthood of believers itself. The equality of all believers in their spiritual authority would be harmed if individual believers should claim their rights for themselves without a calling through the congregation. The congregation must therefore call an appropriate person to represent the others in their name in preaching, administering the sacraments, and listening to confession. Whoever is thus

16. See Shurden, “Priesthood of All Believers.”

17. The wording of the resolution in McBeth, *Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 521ff.

18. A few months later, in November 1988, the Baptist General Convention of Texas in Austin sought to counteract the San Antonio resolution by its own, declaring “that we vigorously undergird the biblical teaching of the priesthood of the believer in Baptist life in local church, associational, and state convention activities” (McBeth, *Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 522). However, the relationship between the ministry of a pastor and the universal priesthood of the believers remains open in this resolution as well.

## EQUIPPING CHURCHES

called gains no advantage before the congregation, but is rather a servant of the congregation in their common commission from God. To be an appointed minister or pastor does not bestow a status different from the universal priesthood but grants a function that allows the church to fulfill her ministry. Luther's understanding of ministry thus arises directly from the concept of the universal priesthood of believers.

This is an understanding that Baptists can easily share. The calling of elders or pastors is a necessary consequence of the universal priesthood. This means that setting apart recognized leaders (not necessarily to ordain them formally) belongs to the *esse* (the essence) of the church. And the role of these ministers in the congregation is to be first among equals. The priesthood of all believers is both the source and the limit of the authority of pastors and elders. The ordination of ministers does not convey a way of being that laypersons don't have but installs a person to a specific function in the church. Recently some Baptist theologians have proposed a sacramental understanding of ordination.<sup>19</sup> But a sacrament in Protestant thinking is a means of salvation or of saving grace, instituted by Jesus Christ, to unite the believers with Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection and in fellowship with one another. Therefore, baptism and the Lord's table may well be understood as sacraments, but not ordination. And to teach ordination as a sacramental transfer of an ontological status different to the status of laypersons means to introduce Roman Catholic sacerdotalism into an evangelical denomination. This is a wrong path.

In one respect, however, Baptists should go beyond Luther's theology of ministry: that is, in the relation of the ordained ministries to the abundance of charismata testified to in the New Testament. An ordained minister not only relieves other church members from certain duties, he or she also encourages and equips the others to practice their respective spiritual gifts, as Eph 4:11ff puts it: "And he (that is Jesus Christ) gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry." Ordained ministers and the other saints form a community of service. A ministry that makes the congregation passive has misunderstood its task.

19. Colwell, "Sacramental Nature of Ordination"; Holmes, "Towards a Baptist Theology"; Goodliff, *Ministry, Sacrament and Representation*; Brewer, "Baptist View"; Bakker, "Roaring Side of Ministry."

## EQUIPPING CHURCHES

### The Priesthood of All Believers in TCTCV

TCTCV names faith, sacraments, and ministry as the essential elements of communion. Its section about the ministry within the church starts with the distressing but realistic statement that there exist serious differences relating to the priesthood of the ordained, because some churches consider ordained ministers as priests and others do not. Regrettably the text does not say why others do not. It is because they believe in the universal priesthood of believers. This seems to me the biggest obstacle on the path to unity among the churches. If the churches could agree about the ontological equality between ordained ministers and the other church members and that the priesthood of all believers is both the source and the limitation of the ordained ministry, then we could more easily get through the other difficulties relating to the ministry within the church. The convergence text states these other difficulties in the following paragraphs: the necessity of the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter, and deacon; the apostolic succession of ordained ministry; the way in which authority is recognized and exercised in the church; the authority of ecumenical councils and a universal ministry of unity.<sup>20</sup> The text rightly says that “it must continue to be an urgent priority for the churches to discover how they [i.e., the differences relating to the priesthood of only some Christians or of all] can be overcome.”<sup>21</sup> It seems that still a long way lies before us.

### Bibliography

- Althaus, Paul. *Die Theologie Martin Luthers*. 5th ed. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1980.
- Bakker, Henk. “The Roaring Side of the Ministry: A Turn to Sacramentalism.” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 38 (2011) 403–26.
- . “‘We Are All Equal’ (*Omnes sumus aequales*): A Critical Assessment of Early Protestant Ministerial Thinking.” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 44 (2017) 353–76.
- Blevins, Carolyn D. “The Priesthood of All Believers.” *Baptist History*, 2001. <http://www.baptisthistory.org/baptistorigins/priesthood.html>.
- Brewer, Brian C. “A Baptist View of Ordained Ministry: Just a Function, or a Way of Being?” In *Papers of the Study and Research Division of the Baptist World Alliance 2005–2010*, 249–77. *Baptist Faith and Witness* 4. Falls Church, VA: BWA, 2011.
- Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden (Union of Evangelical Free Churches [Baptists in Germany]). “Was wir glauben.” *Baptisten*, n.d. <https://www.baptisten.de/der-befg/wir-ueber-uns/was-wir-glauben/#c2931>.

20. See Swarat, “Einheit und Trennung.”

21. WCC, TCTCV, §45.

## EQUIPPING CHURCHES

- BWA. *We Baptists*. Franklin, TN: Study and Research Division of the BWA, 1999.
- Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec. "What Do Baptists Believe?" Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec, n.d. <https://baptist.ca/about/what-do-baptists-believe/>.
- Colwell, John E. "The Sacramental Nature of Ordination: An Attempt to Re-Engage a Catholic Understanding and Practice." In *Baptist Sacramentalism*, edited by A. R. Cross and P. E. Thompson, 228–46. Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2003.
- Eastwood, C. Cyril. *The Priesthood of All Believers: An Examination of the Doctrine from the Reformation to the Present Day*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960.
- Garrett, James Leo, Jr. *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009.
- George, Timothy. "The Priesthood of All Believers." In *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church*, edited by Paul Basden and David S. Dockery, 85–96. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991.
- . "The Reformation Roots of the Baptist Tradition." *Perichoresis* 1 (2003) 65–81.
- Goertz, Harald. *Allgemeines Priestertum und ordiniertes Amt bei Luther*. Marburger theologische Studien. Marburg, Germany: Elwert, 1997.
- Goodliff, Paul. *Ministry, Sacrament and Representation: Ministry and Ordination in Contemporary Baptist Theology, and the Rise of Sacramentalism*. Oxford, UK: Regent's Park College Press, 2010.
- Holmes, Stephen R. "Towards a Baptist Theology of Ordained Ministry." In *Baptist Sacramentalism*, edited by A. R. Cross and P. E. Thompson, 247–62. Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2003.
- Lumpkin, William L. *Baptist Confessions of Faith*. 2nd rev. ed. Revised by Bill J. Leonard. Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2011.
- Luther, Martin. *Deutsch-Deutsche Studienausgabe*. 3 vols. Leipzig: Evangelisch, 2016.
- . *Lateinisch-Deutsche Studienausgabe*. 3 vols. Leipzig: Evangelisch, 2009.
- McBeth, H. Leon. *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1990.
- Mullins, Edgar Y. *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith*. Edited by C. D. Weaver. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010.
- Norman, R. Stanton. *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005.
- . *More Than Just a Name: Preserving our Baptist Identity*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001.
- Pendleton, J. M. *Distinctive Principles of Baptists*. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1882.
- Pinson, William M., Jr. "Baptists: The Priesthood of the Believer or of Believers?" Baptist Distinctives, n.d. <https://www.baptistdistinctives.org/resources/articles/the-priesthood-of-the-believer-or-of-believers/>.
- Rees, Frank D. "The Worship of All Believers." In *Papers of the Study and Research Division of the Baptist World Alliance 2000–2005*, 26–40. Baptist Faith & Witness 3. Falls Church, VA: BWA, 2005.
- Shurden, Walter B. *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993.
- . *The Doctrine of the Priesthood of Believers*. Nashville: Convention, 1987.
- . "The Priesthood of All Believers and Pastoral Authority in Baptist Thought." In *The Priesthood of All Believers: Proclaiming the Baptist Vision*, edited by Walter B. Shurden, 1:131–54. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993.



## EQUIPPING CHURCHES

- , ed. *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision*. Vol. 1 of *The Priesthood of All Believers*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993.
- Smyth, John. *The Works of John Smyth*. 2 vols. Edited by W. T. Whitley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915.
- Swarat, Uwe. "Einheit und Trennung in der Kirche Jesu Christi: Eine freikirchlich-evangelische Perspektive." *Catholica* 73 (2019) 35–52.
- . "What Baptists Have Learned and Still Can Learn from Luther in the Doctrines of Justification and of the Church." *Baptistic Theologies* 8 (2016) 1–15.
- Tooze, George H. *Baptist Principles with Practical Applications and Questions for Discussion*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2013.
- Truett, George W. "The Baptist Message and Mission for the World Today." In *The Life of Baptists in the Life of the World: 80 Years of the Baptist World Alliance*, edited by Walter B. Shurden, 107–27. Address to the Baptist World Congress, Atlanta, 1939. Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1985.
- WCC. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Faith and Order 214. Geneva: WCC, 2013.
- Wendebourg, Dorothea. "Kirche." In *Luther Handbuch*, edited by Albrecht Beutel, 403–14. Handbucher Theologie. Tübingen, Germ.: Mohr Siebeck, 2005.
- West, W. M. S. *Baptist Principles*. London: Baptist Church House, 1963.
- Williams, Charles. *The Principles and Practices of the Baptists: A Book for Inquirers*. London: Baptist Tract Society, 1879.
- Wright, Nigel G. *Challenge to Change: A Radical Agenda for Baptists*. Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway, 1991.
- . *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision*. Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005.

# Seeds of the Church

*Towards an Ecumenical Baptist Ecclesiology*

EDITED BY

Teun van der Leer, Henk Bakker,  
Steven R. Harmon, and Elizabeth Newman

FOREWORD BY *Neville Callam*



CASCADE Books • Eugene, Oregon

SEEDS OF THE CHURCH  
Towards an Ecumenical Baptist Ecclesiology

Free Church, Catholic Tradition 4

Copyright © 2022 Wipf and Stock Publishers. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401.

Cascade Books  
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers  
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3  
Eugene, OR 97401

[www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com)

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-6667-1837-9

HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-6667-1838-6

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-6667-1839-3

*Cataloguing-in-Publication data:*

---

Names: van der Leer, Teun, editor. | Bakker, Henk, 1960–, editor. | Harmon, Steven R. (Steven Ray), editor. | Newman, Elizabeth, 1960–, editor. | Callam, Neville, foreword.

Title: Seeds of the church : towards an ecumenical baptist ecclesiology / edited by Teun van der Leer, Hank Bakker, Steven R. Harmon, and Elizabeth Newman ; foreword by Neville Callam.

Description: Eugene, OR : Cascade Books, 2022 | Series: Free Church, Catholic Tradition 4 | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: ISBN 978-1-6667-1837-9 (paperback) | ISBN 978-1-6667-1838-6 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-1-6667-1839-3 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Baptists—History. | Baptists—Doctrines | Church—Unity. | Ecumenical movement. | Church—Catholicity.

Classification: BX6331.3 .S38 2022 (print) | BX6331.3 .S38 (ebook)

---

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, © 1989 by Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.