

**His blood I will require at your hand:
the issue of theological education for the laity**

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Abstract

The “priesthood of all believers” was one of the most important principles which fuelled the Reformation, but it soon faded into a mere slogan. Theoretically, it is still proclaimed in some of the Afrikaans-speaking churches but in practice clergy often feel threatened by it and laity easily abuse it. Academics and theologians took firm control of formal theological education in an effort to secure their position in and influence on society. Laity – by using books, courses, programmes, seminars and camps as well as their first-hand experiences in life – developed into a priesthood of “knowers” for whom the institutionalised church with its inability to provide solutions to burning issues is rapidly losing credibility. As a result, laity are not able to perform even the basic functions and are in urgent need of intensive education and training before any changes in behaviour can be expected.

Introduction

A major requirement for the survival of any religion is the handing down of its beliefs, traditions and rituals to the next generation (Elias 2006:190). Theological education is a necessity if children and youth are to learn from living models of what the religious faith professes. Theological knowledge is necessary to develop mature faith (Elias 2006:191). Every theological tradition currently admits to the importance of training given to the non-ordained but nothing much seems to change either in praxis or in theology (Karkkainen 1999:144). The damage done to the church by defining God’s people from a top-down perspective has been catastrophic (Ogden 2003:92).

The article shows how the Christian church repeatedly failed to sidestep the pitfall of hierarchy. It is an appeal for a drastic reformation regarding theological education in the two traditional Afrikaans-speaking Churches (DRC and Hervormde Churches) who believe the orthodox doctrines, to also practise them (cf. Mathew 1996). The inability to teach in such a way that believers are equipped to use their gifts both inside the church and for the benefit of the world can be linked to the inability to move away from the hierarchical system by implementing the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. A summary of the development of the laity in early Christian history serves as an introduction to the different standpoints of Luther and Calvin on the principle of general priesthood. Both these reformers influenced the church in the Netherlands and an assimilated dogma made its way with the European settlers to South Africa where it developed into three distinctive strands of theology, each with its own view on this and other issues. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is still proclaimed theoretically by two of the traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches. Both the Reformed (DR) and the Hervormde Churches became frozen in their hierarchical systems, unable to adapt to changing circumstances and needs or to keep the momentum of *Semper Reformanda* going. Nothing but a Copernican revolution of the mind and heart can change this heretical state of affairs (Banks & Stevens 1997).

The term “laity” is generally not used in Protestant circles, due to the principle of the general priesthood claimed by Luther when the Reformation started. The reformers abolished the use of the term, but this only complicated the situation because it is no simple task to fight something that is not supposed to exist (Banks & Stevens 1997). Not only did the heresy of distinction between clergy and laity survive the Reformation, the concept of a pope as chief in charge is also alive and well in many Protestant churches today (cf. Mathew 1996).

The purpose of the church should not be to bring men into subjection to the church, but rather to train them into a royal priesthood capable of bringing the world into subjection to Christ the King ... The church has by and large paid lip service to the priesthood of all believers, because its hierarchy has distrusted the implications of the doctrine, and because it has seen the church as an end in itself and not as an instrument (Rushdoony 1977:764).

Ogden (2003:128) shows that church members in general think that the word “laity” means non-ordained Christians whose function it is to help clergy do the work of the church on a voluntary basis. This clearly shows the misconception regarding the priesthood of all believers. “All members of the

ecclesia have in principle the same calling, responsibility and dignity; have their part in the apostolic and ministerial nature and calling of the church” (Kraemer 1958:160).

Hobbs (1990), a Southern Baptist, explains the principle of the priesthood of all believers like this: It is founded upon New Testament texts and it entails privileges such as direct access to God in prayer, direct confession to God without the mediation of a human priest, and the individual interpretation of Scripture. The responsibilities of the doctrine, on the other hand, include love, holiness, study and knowledge of the faith and sharing it with others. The doctrine emphasises that there is no such thing as a Christian without a ministry (Guelzo 1991:37). At present, the laity is not able to perform even the basic functions and is in urgent need of intensive education and training before any changes in behaviour can be expected.

Christianity’s radical transformation regarding theological education

The Old Testament concept of the priesthood acting on behalf of the people is reflected in the title of the paper. The priest Ezekiel is told that he will be held responsible for the behaviour of the people. His instructions or lack of it to his people, will determine the Lord’s judgement on him.

When Jesus Christ became the last High Priest, things changed drastically. The church was essentially amateur in nature – a work of love. A plurality of people taught the gospel, and the congregational meeting was the place where Christians exercised their spiritual gifts and encouraged each other to love and act in love (Rom. 12:68, 1 Cor. 12:4-14; 14:12,26, Col. 3:16; Hebr. 10:24-25; 1 Pet 4:10,11).

It has already been established that there is no trace of the term “laity” in the New Testament (Faivre 1990:3). There were functional distinctions between various kinds of ministries but no hierarchical division between clergy and laity (Snyder 1977:94, 95). During the first century, divisions between Christians were removed on all levels of society. Believers formed a new group called “cleros” (Faivre 1990:3) – a people set apart where all were equal. In the early church, theology was the knowledge of salvation of humans through Christ and all Christians were theologians in that sense of the word (Elias 2006:183). Recent research (like the work of Volf 1998, and Inbody 2005) concludes that the term “people of God” refers to the Christian church and that there was no distinction between groups within the variety of people who made up the church (Lawler 2005:101).

The Roman Catholic Church's hierarchical structure

By the second century, a paradigm shift began to take place when emphasis moved from the spiritual focus of the church to the historic-empirical church (Pont 1964:2). The principle of the general priesthood (backed by New Testament texts such as 1 Pet. 2:5, Rom 15:16 and Rev. 1:6 – Pont 1964:1) was moved to the periphery and in its place a hierarchical structure developed, placing the clergy higher than the laity. Faivre (1990) demonstrates that the laity did not appear as a separate class in the church until the middle of the third century. From then on, the focus fell on the external organisation and the priesthood was organised by the institution (Pont 1964:2). The role and task of the layman decreased considerably. As the head and financial manager of his household, the layman's primary ministry from then on, was the financial support of the church (Mattison 2009). Theological education was reserved for clergy and the total lack of knowledge became so great that it served as a major motivation for the Reformation.

Although some of the church fathers still spoke about the priesthood of all Christians, in general this principle faded and only returned sporadically in the works of Hugo of St Victor (1096-1141) and John Wycliffe (1329-1384). The first real attempt to rework this concept into theology was made by Johannes Huss (1369-1415), followed by Wessel Gansfort (1420-1489) (Pont 1964:3).

The Reformation and the principle of the priesthood of all believers

The clergy-laity dichotomy is a direct carry-over from pre-Reformation Roman Catholicism and a throwback to the pattern of the Old Testament priesthood – an obvious mistake. Although the early reformers recognised this, it was not rectified during the Reformation, nor was there any other attempt made for adjustment afterwards. “Today, four centuries after the Reformation, the full implications of this Protestant affirmation have yet to be worked out” (Erkel 1994:2).

Dissatisfaction with the church could be found on all levels of European society by the time preceding the Reformation (Kreis 2002). The people sought a more personal, spiritual and immediate kind of religion – something that would touch them directly and change their lives. They found the growing emphasis on rituals unhelpful in their quest for personal salva-

tion. The Papacy had lost much of its spiritual influence over the people due to secularisation and the clergy had become lax, corrupt and immoral (Kreis 2002). This situation led to two major responses: On the one hand, anti-clericalism developed and on the other hand, the calls for reform increased steadily (Kreis 2002).

Luther

For Luther the priesthood of all believers means primarily the right of preaching the Word and the administration of absolution and discipline (Karkkainen 1999:146). Not only the pope, but each individual believer can and ought to read the Scripture for him/herself and interpret it, based on the words of 1 Cor. 14:30 and Joh. 6:45. The first reference to the principle of the priesthood of all believers in the works of Luther can be found in *To the Christian nobility* written in German and two months later in the *Babylonian captivity of 1520*, written in Latin. Luther's defence answer (1521), Retractions (1521) and *Against Henry King of England* (1522) also refer to this concept (Nagel 1997:283).

Pont (1964:5), a renowned church historian from the Hervormde Church – to which we will return later – gives a summary of Luther's thoughts on the priesthood of all believers: The true priesthood belongs to Jesus Christ. Through baptism and faith, believers share in the high priest office of Christ, and they are all priests in service of God and priests to each other. Each individual believer must sacrifice. This sacrifice consists of prayer and proclaiming the gospel as well as to do the duties that they took upon themselves as part of the community. All of this they may do because not one of these gifts of the Holy Spirit is exclusive to the office bearers of the church. The nature of the priesthood of the believer, however, is internal and spiritual. The church officer also shares this general priesthood but through his further calling, confirmed by the congregation, he becomes a servant with a specific task and function after his confirmation into the office.

As time passed and the consequences of the Reformation became clearer (also the revolts and possibility of falling into anarchy), Luther became quiet about this principle.

Calvin

The Bible as sole rule of faith with rejection of ecclesiastical authority established a subjectivity in faith that opened the door to never-ending disputes within Protestantism (Kirsch 1911). Calvin, the second generation reformer, not so much in time as in terms of development of thought, used dogma to set boundaries to the freedom of individual interpretations of Scripture. Calvin did not really add anything particularly new to Protestant

theology but he provided a logical and analytical structure to its doctrine. Although Calvin saw the Church as body of Christ, the priesthood of all believers, which very easily could be understood as a common possession of all the necessary gifts, plays no role in his doctrine (Nietsel 1956), and the Calvinistic churches are institutionally focused.

Calvin did refer to the concept of the general priesthood in his *Institutions* but it is not a focal point of his theology. His thoughts on this issue are, according to Pont (1964:7), rooted in the *triplex munus* of Christ as priest, prophet and king. Christ is the sole priest and the church is only priest through Christ. The priesthood of Church members is a spiritual privilege, a personal calling that

- provides individuals access to God
- brings a responsibility to the church as *mater fidelium*
- and results in the world as place where the priesthood must be practised.

The reformers on theological education

Although the reformers wanted to go back to the patterns set in the Bible for the faith community, this could not be done right away due to the legacy built up by centuries of keeping the laity uninformed (Kraemer 1962:62). (The lack of knowledge eventually sidetracked Protestantism into the too heavy emphasis on the preaching of the true dogma – a heresy that is crippling Protestantism to this day.)

Luther wanted to achieve the establishment of a body of true believers, or a body of so-called “priests” via education (Van Zyl 2007:181). Both adults and children were instructed in the basic issues of faith by using the Catechisms (Van Zyl 2007:196) – a brief and simple summary of the Christian faith, providing answers to the most crucial religious questions of the day.

Calvin also saw instruction – all fundamentally religious in nature – as a hopeful means for the reformation of the lives of individuals, and, through them, of home and church and society (De Jong 1967:201). It was Calvin who placed catechism – theological education for the laity – directly and fully under the control of pastors (De Jong 1967:179), and thereby wiped the principle of general priesthood from the reformation table. The pastor became the omni-competent administrator, teacher, evangelist, theologian and counsellor; the paternalistic authority figure in the Protestant church (Mattison 2009).

Post-Reformation developments

After the Reformation, the priesthood of the believers again surfaced and played a major role in Pietism, the Second Reformation and the missiological efforts of the Methodism (Pont 1964:8, 9).

The Netherlands

The concept of the priesthood of all believers never developed into an autonomous principle (Pont 1964:1). Even after the acceptance of the Confessio Helvetica Posterior in 1566, which is second only to the Heidelberg Confession as the most widely accepted Confession of Protestant faith, when it was accepted as an official doctrine of the Protestant church, it still resorted under the offices (Pont 1964:1). In this document, it is stated that the general priesthood of all believers is meant as a spiritual priesthood and that the sacrifice that believers must bring is continuous thanksgiving and praise to God – a simplification of the Biblical concept (Pont 1964:8). The Confessio Helvetica Posterior was well received in the Netherlands (Baker 2008:298) but it was not formally included in the confessions of faith, and the principle of the general priesthood of all believers only functioned by implication in the formal setting of the more Calvinistic focused church in the Netherlands. In the Belgic Confession of 1561 the concept is only present by implication in article 27. This is also the way it is presented in the other Calvinistic confessions – by implication only (Pont 1964:8). Although it also did not function extensively in the Church Orders, it was implicated because the congregation as a group of believers did not need the officials to constitute an official gathering. It continued to influence the service and responsibilities of individual believers (Pont 1964:8).

South Africa

The South African branch of the church functioned under the DEIC and therefore under the classis of Amsterdam. It used the same confessions of faith as the mother church in the Netherlands. Three Afrikaans-speaking churches developed, declaring themselves “sisters” on account of the shared dogmatic confessions.

Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk

The biggest of the three traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches, the Dutch Reformed Church (NG), does not mention the concept of priesthood of all believers in their 2007 Church Order, due to the more liberal and modern way of putting words on paper that is characteristic of this denomination. The hierarchical presbuteral-synodal system is firmly in place (NGK 2007:11). Service of the believers is mentioned (NGK 2007:23) (and therefore the priesthood is present by implication), and it is stated that believers should be “activated” but this action stays firmly under supervision of the pastors, church council and synods.

Gereformeerde Kerke

Being the smallest of the three churches, this church is the most conservative and firmly rooted in Neo-Calvinism. Their Church Order does not mention any office or service for ordinary believers. The word “priesthood” is absent from the Church Order and other official documents. The hierarchical system of presbuteral-synodal Calvinism forms the foundation of the church organisation (Art 29 – Gereformeerde kerke).

Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk

The odd one out is the Hervormde Church, from which the two other denominations stemmed (the Dutch Reformed Church in 1842 and the Gereformeerde Kerke in 1857). Official documents of the church that accepted the truth and importance of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers include the following:

- *Eene Stem uit Mooirivier*, the pastoral letter by the General Assembly meeting of 1855;
- The letter from the Commission of the General Assembly, in which the reasons why people are members of the church are listed, dated 1957. In this document, the calling and responsibility of the individual believer are explained and the priesthood of all believers is emphasised (Pont 1964:10).

Carrying the tradition as it was preserved in the Netherlands, the priesthood of all believers is only present by implication in the confessions, but Pont (1984:40) sees it as fundamental to the whole ecclesiology of the Hervormde Church. Formally, it is expressed in the wording of the 2008 Church Order:

- Where the work and functioning of the congregational assembly (*gemeentevergadering*) is spelled out. It is the task of this meeting to reflect on the priesthood of all believers (NHK 2008:64).
- A special form of catechesis is given to members in order to equip them to fulfil their calling to be priests (NHK 2008:77).
- Under equipping the members (NHK 2008:79) the priesthood of all believers is mentioned with regard to the task of the Church to equip members and officials by means of preaching, catechesis, bible study, study meetings, courses, institutions and publications of the church.

Although it is confirmed by their Church Order that all believers are priests, in practice the structures and traditions are kept in such a way that the church members stay firmly under the control of the officials (example: in most cases, only ministers of religion are allowed to lead bible study classes – to ensure that no false doctrine is spread).

Statistically, none of these churches is in a healthy state. The Hervormde Church is losing about 1 000 members annually since the 1970's (Dreyer 2003:1053). The Gereformeerde Churches were losing 1 690 members annually over the past ten years (De Klerk 2007:9). The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Church also lost a steady stream of 1 000 members per year since 1980 (De Villiers 2007).

Congregations of all three churches tend to focus inward on maintenance and in most cases too much on financial survival or growth in numbers, instead of equipping people for work and ministry in God's world (cf. Fortin 2005:369).

The current problem regarding theological education

The priesthood of all believers, and therefore the gifts of the Holy Spirit, do not function in the traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches due to the fact that the hierarchical system is kept firmly in place. Theological education is under supervision of and dependent on approval and involvement of individual pastors as well as church councils, synods, and general assemblies. It is very difficult to turn from such a dependency model to an equipping model (Ogden 2003:112, 121). Once again, the church is caught up in its own dogma and tradition.

The following issues regarding theological education in the Afrikaans-speaking churches are all related to the fact that the principle of the priesthood of all believers does not form part of the practical side of church life.

Formal theological education is in most cases reserved for the clergy who have to study at designated universities. Theological education to the laity can be divided into two categories; catechesis and equipment programmes.

Catechesis is used to instruct children and non-members of the church. The goal is to lead them to confession of faith and full membership. In most cases, the contents are cognitive in nature and focuses on knowledge of the Bible, confessions and church history. Although attention is also given in some regard to the affective aspects of faith (more so in the NG Church), there is a need for the development of manual and physical skills through education.

Members of the church are normally educated by means of courses and programmes, which in most cases must be approved by the local church council as well as the top structures of the church. Participation in adult formal programmes for religious education is low (cf. Davis 2007:48). One of the reasons why believers do not participate in these formal programmes, is because they tend to think that listening to a sermon is an adequate source of theological education (Elias 2006:180). Religion and faith also became a private matter (De Vries 1995:177). In search of answers that they either do not get from church programmes or no longer seek from official church sources, the laity tend to turn to sources that are readily available like the internet, books, courses, camps and revival programmes.

The church fails to recognise and provide for the different levels of faith among the members who think, act and equip themselves (Fortin 2005:364). Broks (2003:76) calls this “the priesthood of all knowers” that replaced the principle of the priesthood of all believers. Modern-day Christians see themselves as experts because of their own experiences and ability to gain access to any information they want. Truth is now to be found in subjectively lived experience, and in one’s own readings of the sacred texts rather than in expert proclamations (Broks 2003:76).

The most shocking result of the ignorance regarding the priesthood of all believers can be seen in the fact that churches have to teach and nurture both children and adults on the very basic aspects of Christianity (De Vries 1995:171).

The principle of the priesthood of all believers brings with it both privileges and responsibilities. Education is potentially a revolutionary force for individuals, institutions and societies but the thought of serious theological education to the laity is accompanied by widespread fear and anxiety. The clergy is afraid of losing their privileges like power, influence, money and being pulled from their comfort zones, while the laity is afraid of having to take up their responsibility and change their way of life (Oliver 2009).

The greatest negative result of inadequate education is that the great tool of influence that is expected of all believers, namely a priestly life

(Countryman 1999:153), is nowhere to be found and there is apparently no difference between Christians and non-believers in the Afrikaner community (for instance during peak time traffic).

Conclusion

Most Protestant denominations reject the idea of the priesthood as a group that is spiritually distinct from lay people. In practice though, the vast majority of Protestants draw some distinction between ordained ministers and lay people. This is also true of Afrikaner Protestantism where the hierarchical system, which forms the basis for church life, overshadows the principle of the priesthood of all believers. The paradigm shift that occurred through the Reformation did not move the principle of the priesthood of all believers back to centre stage. It only replaced the spiritual hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church with a Church Order and a new hierarchy. This crossed out one of the basic principles of the Christian faith and caused the wheels of the Reformation to be sidetracked.

Although both Luther and Calvin recognised the need for theological education, the traditional contents of the catechism became irrelevant for modern-day believers who have to confront the powerful alternatives of the post-modern culture and world religions. Believers are seeking once again for a personal, spiritual and immediate kind of religion – something that is able to change their lives. The fact that the church as institution lost its position of authority in the lives of the younger Afrikaner generations could be linked directly to the inadequate theological education practised of the last fifty to eighty years.

As long as no substantial theological education is given to the laity, the principle of general priesthood will remain a mere slogan and the church will fail to influence society through the service and ministry of its members. Afrikaners cannot claim to be Christians when there is no attempt to live according to the basic biblical principles of faith.

The church is perhaps the only institution with the beliefs, literature, liturgy, practices, social structure, and authority (diminished though it may be) necessary to rescue people from the violence and other deforming features of modern-day life (Charry 1994:166). If we as South African Christians, and especially the Afrikaans-speaking church leaders and policy makers, see this statement as true, drastic reformation regarding theological education of the laity is urgently needed. Orthodox doctrines and their implications must be implemented to turn the downward spiral of Afrikaner Christianity around and enable this group to play an important part in changing the current negative social structure of our country.

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