

WILLIAM BULLEIN JOHNSON, AN ADVOCATE OF THE PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS

Baptists are a diverse people. Today, hundreds of different sub-denominations exist under the name of Baptist and beliefs between these groups vary. There is, however, a group of common distinctives that most Baptists affirm. Early in Baptist history, confessional statements were written to outline these distinctives. As Baptists evolved, these statements were interpreted and reinterpreted. Each generation had opportunity to interpret the scriptures in light of modern scholarship and their *Sitz-im-Leben*.¹ This liberty helped Baptists refine and define basic Baptist beliefs for each generation. The process was not easy or without great struggle.

Baptist theologians have written numerous books and articles to list and define Baptist distinctives. No two lists are the same. As early as 1913, B. H. Carroll, wrote of these distinctives in a book entitled *Baptists and Their Doctrines*. Carroll defined six distinctives: (1) the New Testament--the law of Christianity; (2) individuality; (3) freedom of conscience; (4) salvation is essential to baptism and church membership; (5) the doctrine of the church; and, (6) God's order in the Gospel of his Son. Carroll's fifth distinctive was broken down further into eight separate categories.² Thirteen years later, James S. Kirtley narrowed these distinctives into *the* Baptist distinctive. About this distinctive, he wrote:

Any person who ever lived or ever could live, has as much inherent right to deal personally with God as any other person who ever did or ever could live. That is to say, there is something in the human soul, something in God, something in our relations to each other and to God, which makes it just as right for one person to have dealings with God as for any other person.³

This one distinctive is what others call the priesthood of believers. Indeed, all Baptist beliefs are informed by this fundamental doctrine. However, this belief is shared with other Protestant traditions, as are other primary Baptist doctrines. Beasley-Murray has correctly stated: "It is the combination of these various beliefs which makes Baptist distinctives. Perhaps Baptist distinctives may be likened to a set of genes which, because of their particular arrangement, produce a family likeness wherever they are found."⁴

These principles did not originate in a seminary or lecture hall. Lay and clergy who worked out their faith with fear and trembling formed them. Often, they paid a great price to stand by their beliefs. It is to one such person that we now turn.

¹*German*: setting in life, or life situation.

²B. H. Carroll, *Baptists and Their Doctrines*, ed. J. B. Cranfil (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1913), 7-36.

³James S. Kirtley, *The Baptist Distinctive and Objective* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1926), 7.

⁴Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers: The Baptist way of being the church* (Brightwell, England: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1992), 6.

Historical Introduction

Shortly, after the establishment of a missionary enterprise in India by British Baptists, American Congregationalist Missionaries joined missionary William Carey and Baptists in reaching the lost for Christ. While in India, three of these Congregationalists, Adoniram Judson, Ann H. Judson, and Luther Rice, became convinced that Baptist theology was more biblically sound, and thereby, converted to the Baptist church. This left them, however, without support from the Congregationalist brethren who had sent them. As result, the unmarried, Rice, was sent back to America to enlist support of America Baptists for the mission work. Providentially, Rice met a pastor named William Bullein Johnson--whom helped Rice form a Baptist mission's society. This American-based mission's society represented Baptists across the entire nation. In the ensuing years, a controversy arose, however, that jeopardized the mission work and the unity of fellow Baptists. For some the central issue was whether slavery was morally right or wrong. For others, the primary issue was the Baptist principle of the priesthood of all believers. The concern was whether the "right" view of morality or biblical interpretation should be required of those who call themselves Baptists. The controversy surrounding this distinctive was then, as it is now, the cause of confusion, misunderstanding, and intolerance. William Johnson's role in the formation and application of this distinctive is central to our understanding of this important Baptist principle. Before his role is discussed, more must be known about the man.

William Bullein Johnson: A Biography

Johnson was born on June 13, 1782, to Joseph Johnson and Mary Bullein. His parents had three children but only one who survived infancy. William's father was a "traveler" and was not home very often. Therefore, William's mother, Mary, raised him, and therefore, had the greater impact upon William's later life. He later wrote, "She was an intelligent and pious woman and bestowed great pains on my intellectual and moral culture."⁵ By the time he was four years old, she had taught him to read and by the time he had reached the age of six, he had started studying Latin. Early in life, William developed a "profound reverence for Holy Scriptures as the Word of God."⁶ His mother taught him the great principles of the Christian faith that he relied upon heavily later in life as a preacher.

Johnson was born on John's Island near Charleston, South Carolina. His family was among some of the first settlers of the state. His mother's family was of the Particular Baptist faith. Particular Baptists believed that only particular people had been elected by God to be saved. This was opposed to what General Baptists believed--that God's grace could be received or rejected by anyone.

When William was just a small boy, his parents moved to Georgetown, South Carolina where he spent most of his childhood. When he was nine years old, President

⁵William Bullein Johnson, *Reminiscences*, as quoted by Hortense Woodson in *Giant in the Land* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1950), 1.

⁶*Ibid.*

George Washington came to visit Georgetown. Johnson's mother was selected to help plan the reception for the first president. When he showed up at the reception, William's mother took the young Johnson over to Washington, was introduced, and they shook hands.

Another great man made an impression on Johnson's young mind. Dr. Richard Furman, the pastor of First Baptist Church Charleston came to Georgetown to preach. As in the Church of England, Furman wore a long robe in the pulpit and tabs around his collar that was representative of the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Johnson wrote of the event:

My acquaintance with this man of God began when I was a boy, & I well remember the deep and solemn impression which his grave & ministerial appearance made upon my mind, young as I was; an impression which was deepened by a more familiar knowledge of his character.⁷

In 1799, Johnson's mother died and he moved in with a Keith family of Georgetown. He decided to pursue a law career and did some studying at Brown University and more on his own. After finishing this study in law, he moved to the Beaufort District of South Carolina to live with his father and prepared to take the bar exam. His father had remarried after "a suitable time" after his mother's death.⁸ His stepmother introduced him to her niece. Johnson wrote later of the significance of this introduction: "In December, 1803, I followed my father's example and married Henrietta Hornby Henrietta was an excellent wife and mother To her I am greatly indebted for her judicious support in my ministerial course."⁹

In the summer of 1804, during a revival service, William and Henrietta joined a Baptist church in the town of Beaufort, South Carolina. Johnson was among six ministers to come out of that revival. Immediately, as opportunities provide, Johnson began preaching in churches of the area. In Euhaw, South Carolina, the Baptist church asked him to supply for their sick pastor. Soon thereafter, the pastor died and the church called Johnson to become its pastor. He joined the church and accepted the office of pastor on Sunday, January 5, 1806 and was set apart for the gospel ministry. His years in Euhaw were enjoyable. The Johnsons celebrated the birth of three children while serving in Euhaw. During William's ministry there, he became involved in the Savannah Baptist Association. The moderator of the meetings was the same Dr. Furman who had so impressed the young Johnson.

After four years of service to the Euhaw church, Johnson felt the need to further his education for ministry and moved to Columbia, South Carolina to study at South Carolina College. He began to study under the tutelage Jonathan Maxcy, president of the college. Maxcy asked Johnson to become the chaplain of the college, and he accepted. Columbia had only one church--a Methodist Church. So, with the help of about a dozen people, Johnson founded a Baptist church in Columbia. It constituted with only 15 members.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., 5.

⁹Ibid., 5-6.

Now being in the center of the state, Johnson had the opportunity to meet ministers from both the upper and lower regions. Johnson noticed that pastors from the lower state were more educated than those in the upper state. For years, many ministers in the Charleston Association had the benefit of financial assistance for education. Johnson became burdened for a theological seminary for the education of all Baptist ministers.

In the spring of 1811, Johnson received a unanimous call to be pastor of the Baptist church in Savannah, Georgia. This calling offered him an opportunity to provide better support for his growing family. Also, he felt that his “usefulness would be enlarged” in Savannah.¹⁰ After saying farewell to his friends in Columbia, he accepted the call and moved with his family to Savannah.

In 1813, while Johnson was attending a meeting of the Savannah Baptist Association, a young man by the name of Luther Rice addressed the gathering. Rice was traveling to association meetings across the nation to gather support for the foreign mission work in India. After hearing him speak, Johnson approached Rice and proposed the formation of a Baptist society to support foreign missions. Rice wrote of the meeting:

After completing the range of travel and formation of mission societies, I had a conversation with Brother Johnson . . . on the subject of having a meeting of delegates from all the societies of this kind, for the purpose of forming some general combination or concert of action among them. He consented and engaged that, in case it should be agreed to by others concerned, he would go personally as a delegate from the Savannah society as far as Philadelphia to attend such a meeting . . . The meeting was held accordingly in Philadelphia, in April 1814; and thus, in the operations of Divine Providence, was brought about the formation of the Triennial Convention of the Baptist denomination of the United States for Foreign Missions and other important objects relating to the Redeemer’s kingdom.¹¹

Johnson was asked to help draft the constitution of this new society called the Triennial Convention. In the constitution, Johnson helped summarize the society’s purpose. The preamble to the constitution read:

We the delegates from Missionary Societies, and other religious bodies of the Baptist denomination, in various parts of the United States, met in Convention, for the purpose of carrying into effect the benevolent Intentions of our Constituents, for organizing a plan for eliciting, combining and directing the Energies of the whole Denomination in one sacred effort.¹²

Richard Furman was elected the first president of the convention, a position that Johnson would have later.

¹⁰Ibid., 24.

¹¹Luther Rice, *Testimony of Luther Rice*, as quoted in *State [South Carolina] Convention Minutes*, 1909, 87-88.

¹²*Constitution of the Triennial Baptist Convention* as quoted by Woodson in *Giant in the Land*, 35.

As the result of a difference of opinion about a matter of church polity, Johnson resigned his pastorate in Savannah and moved his family back to Columbia. This matter will be discussed in depth below. An added benefit of the change in climate helped a chronic health problem that plagued Johnson.

The congregation in Columbia, that Johnson had helped start, asked him to co-pastor their church. They were willing to receive him without requiring him to abandon any of his peculiar beliefs.

The years that followed were both productive and tragic. On December 4, 1821, the Columbia Baptist Church was host to South Carolina Baptist churches when the first Baptist state convention in the nation was formed. Johnson helped organize this body, and Dr. Richard Furman was elected as first president. In the following years, Johnson served as president for 27 years. The convention was formed with a centralized form of government. All aspects of the organization were coordinated together. In the societal organization, the benevolences are self-governed.

The next year, Johnson moved to Greenville to become the principle of Greenville Female Academy. At that time, Greenville did not have a Baptist church. So, Johnson started preaching services in the courthouse. Soon, the Baptist community built a meetinghouse and a Baptist church was organized there.

As motioned above, Johnson longed for the formation of a theological school to train ministers. Finally, with the help of Dr. Furman, Basil Manly and several others, Johnson attempted to form an institution cooperatively with Georgia Baptists. Real estate and buildings were donated in Edgefield for the school. However, the joint effort was not to be. Georgia Baptists backed out. Then, Dr. Furman died in 1825. Not defeated, however, South Carolina Baptists formed the Furman Academy and Theological Institute at Edgefield, S.C. in 1826. Eventually, this organization became Furman University.

In 1830, Johnson moved to Edgefield to become principle of Edgefield Female Academy. Also, he was invited to become pastor of Edgefield Baptist church. From the Edgefield pastorate, Johnson would witness the religious and political upheaval of a nation.

As President of the South Carolina Baptist Convention and pastor of a local church, Johnson regularly attended the national meeting of the Triennial Convention. As he attended these meetings, he undoubtedly noticed a growing tension between Baptists in the North and South over the issue of slavery. The tension, however, was not just among the Baptists. Because of the complexity of the issue, the entire nation was divided over the issue. Some of the Baptists in the North were Abolitionists. They were opposed absolutely to slavery. Abolitionists viewed slavery as a sin. Therefore, slave owners should release their slaves and repent. Most Baptists in the South disagreed. Johnson believed that Baptist denomination should not be concerned with issue of slavery.¹³ Due to these major differences, it was apparent that both the denomination and the nation were heading for complete division.

Johnson was elected president of the Triennial Convention in 1841 and served until 1844. During his terms as President, he tried to be a reconciler between Baptists in

¹³Woodson, *Giant in the Land*, 91.

the North and South.¹⁴ Each year, however, the national meetings became more and more tumultuous. The split came when the Board of Foreign Missions decided to not appoint slaveholders as missionaries. Baptists in the South met the following year in Augusta, Georgia to decide what course of action they should take. Johnson took the floor to present the grievances of the South to the delegates. He made the point that Southern Baptists held no hard feelings toward Northern Baptists, but that Baptists in the South differed on matters individual conscience in regard to an issue of biblical interpretation. Some Baptists in the North were intolerant of opposing views and would not allow those in disagreement with them to serve in agencies of the general convention. Thus, to maintain the liberty of conscience and uphold the basic Baptist belief of the priesthood of the believer, Johnson recommended to the gathering that, “a new channel must be created, through which the liberality of the Southern and South Western Baptists shall flow, that its streams may go forth to evangelize the world.”¹⁵ Following Johnson’s words, a proposal to start a new convention was passed, and the Southern Baptist Convention was born.

21st century Baptists, do not question the grossness of error by our founders on the issue of slavery. It is unfair, however, to judge them by our contemporary understandings of racism and prejudice. Advancements in modern biblical scholarship, theology, anthropology, and biology leave no question that Southern Baptists were wrong to support slavery. Sadly, it took the SBC more than a century and a half to issued a statement to this effect in 1995. Despite the misguided nature of our split with our brothers and sisters to the North, God used the convention in the South to launch an evangelism campaign to the entire world. To that end, Baptists of the south can be proud; however, the circumstances surrounding the formation of the SBC must never be forgotten.

Johnson was elected the first president of the new convention and served without interruption until 1851. A constitution that contained 13 points, 12 of which were written by Johnson, was passed on May 11, 1845. During that inaugural administration, education was emphasized. Johnson’s efforts helped the Furman Institute gain university status and led to the formation of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina in 1859.¹⁶

During Johnson’s last years, he served as chancellor to Johnson Female University in Anderson, South Carolina. The school was named in Johnson’s honor because of his efforts to provide educational opportunities for women. In many ways, he was a thinker ahead of his time. On October 2, 1862, Johnson died and was laid to rest in the cemetery of First Baptist Church, Anderson, South Carolina.

Johnson is remembered for many important reasons. He helped establish three Baptist bodies--the Triennial Convention, the South Carolina Baptist State Convention, and the Southern Baptist Convention. While he served several churches as a pastor, Johnson’s gift in ministry was not proclamation. James Morton described Johnson’s preaching as “solid and displaying the work of an informed and logical mind” but it “was

¹⁴Ibid., 102.

¹⁵Johnson, *Reminiscences*, as quoted by Woodson in *Giant in the Land*, 116-117.

¹⁶J. Glen Clayton, *William B. Johnson: Shaper of Southern Baptist Origins* (Nashville: The Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1987).

not as exciting as that of his contemporaries, Jeter, Rice, Fuller, and Furman.”¹⁷ He is best remembered for his leadership in denominational matters. He was practical and had the ability to persuade others with his ideas.¹⁸ Although he is considered by Morton to be “rigid” and “legalistic”¹⁹ in his interpretation of the Bible, Johnson did support Baptist principles in both his writings and practice. Moreover, his experience as a pastor and denominational leader gave him a great opportunity to model these principles. There is one principle, however, where Johnson made his greatest contribution to Baptist thought and practice. His role in defining and practicing the basic Baptist distinctive called the “priesthood of believers,” was crucial to its development and understanding. To Johnson’s thinking on this matter, we now turn.

Priesthood of all Believers: A Historical Overview

The priesthood of all believers originated during the Protestant Reformation. In protest of the Catholic doctrine of priesthood of the clergy, Martin Luther advocated a priesthood of the laity. In the Catholic Church, the clergy served as mediators between God and humanity, however, Luther believed that only Christ served as mediator. This did not mean that Luther wanted to eradicate the priesthood of the clergy. He believed that ministers and pastors played an important role in the church. Clergy have a particular function in the church, but not a more important function than any other believer. To Luther, each believer has received a priestly calling that can be expressed through the numerous gifts of the Spirit.

A generation later, when Baptists originated, they affirmed the principle of the priesthood of all believer. Therefore, Johnson was not the first Baptist to espouse the concept of the individual Christian’s responsibility and privilege as a priest. As early as John Smyth, the actions of the “saynts” were defined in regard to their “Priesthood.”²⁰ In early Baptist churches, whether a congregation had pastoral leadership, or not, did not limit individual responsibility. Thomas Helwys wrote:

That though in respect off CHRIST, the Church bee one And therefore may, and ought, when they are come together, to Pray, Prophecie, breake bread, and administer in all the holy ordinances, although as yet they have no Officers, or that their officers should bee in Prison, sick, or by anie other means hindered from the Church.²¹

The principle continued to flourish and become more defined. In America, John Clarke, Obadiah Holmes, and Isaac Backus wrote of each believer’s rights and

¹⁷James M. Morton, Jr., “Leadership of W. B. Johnson in the Formation of the Southern Baptist Convention,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 5 (January 1970): 3.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., 4.

²⁰John Smyth, *The Differences of the Churches of the seperation*, in *The Works of John Smyth*, ed. Whitley, 1:275.

²¹Lumpkin, *Confessions*, 120.

responsibilities.²² After centuries of defining and redefining, priesthood of all believers means two things. First, all believers have personal access to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, no other mediator is necessary. Second, each Christian is called to be a priest and to minister to the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

Johnson and the Priesthood of Believers

Johnson's contribution to the evolving understanding of the concept of the priesthood of believers was important because of his leadership status among fellow Baptists, and because, of his radical application of this basic Baptist principle. Two particular examples of Johnson's view are worth noting.

First, while ministering in the Savannah church, Johnson and his wife traveled to Boston for the Triennial Convention, and attended church services when a couple joined the Boston fellowship. Johnson became impressed with the way the couple chose to offer themselves to the church for membership. The couple wanted to move their membership from another Baptist church, but they wanted to tell the new congregation what their particular beliefs were first. Johnson felt this method was supported biblically, and when returning to Savannah, called his church into study and conference. He presented the case before the Savannah congregation, but they were not impressed. Johnson felt the issue was too important to dismiss, and resigned his pastorate with the Savannah congregation. He returned to Columbia and sought fellowship with the church he had founded. Not only did his former congregation accept him, but also, asked him to co-pastor. He did not, however, have to subscribe to the Columbia church's views on certain points of church polity. Johnson writes:

My views of church order, which had originated the formation of the church in Savannah had undergone a change. By my removal, an interdict was imposed upon my enjoying the privilege of that church; & an opportunity was afforded me of enjoying the privileges of the church in Columbia, as she was willing to receive me without requiring an abandonment of any of my particular views; & I was willing to retain those views as matters of private judgment, never to be advanced to the disturbance of the harmony of the Denomination.²³

Johnson, enjoying the freedom to exercise his soul's priesthood, was allowed to have interpretations of scripture that differed from his fellow church members. This freedom to interpret scripture under the direction of the Holy Spirit became an important part of the Baptist distinctive called--priesthood of believers.

A Baptist theologian of the next generation, E. Y. Mullins, agreed with this practice. He wrote:

Intelligent personal grasp of truth and inner illumination of the spirit are a part of the structural law of the church. Without these the church is not a church. It is in

²²Walter B. Shurden, *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Priesthood of All Believers* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1993), 135-138.

²³Johnson, *Reminiscences*, as quoted by Woodson in *Giant in the Land*, 40-41.

the same context that Christ gives to Peter the keys of the kingdom and the power of binding and loosing. Experimental knowledge of the truth as revealed to the heart of the individual directly by the Father is the only possible key to the kingdom of God.²⁴

The second example of Johnson's application of the priesthood of believers was when Baptists of the North refused to allow slave owners of the South the opportunity to serve as missionaries. Johnson did not think that the Denomination should take a stand on the issue. He felt that the matter was up to the individual slave owner's conscience and argued that it was a matter of opinion and not of faith. Johnson noted that the Bible does not condemn the practice. Rather, the Scriptures teach the God condones the practice under certain circumstances. Johnson maintained that Jesus taught many morals and commandment but "he touched not the subject of slavery."²⁵

As misguided as this interpretation seems to the modern mind, many educated persons of the South and North believed it to be true. Johnson was influenced by the reason of his day. In this, there is no doubt. The principle on which he based his stand, however, was not flawed. This principle is today called soul competency and is a component of the priesthood of believers. Bill Leonard defines soul competency in the following way:

Soul competency means that Baptists are willing to trust the competency of the individual soul in matters of religion. Each individual is competent to interpret Scripture according to the dictates of conscience and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Each individual is free to live out Christian faith without coercion or interference from the state.²⁶

Johnson used the same reasoning when he argued that the slave owners should be allowed to become missionaries. With their conscience and the Holy Spirit as guides, believers must answer to God for their beliefs and actions. The Denomination or State must not coerce them to do otherwise.

From the vantage point of the modern student of history, theology, and science, it is acknowledged that Johnson's interpretations of the Bible were flawed in regard to slavery.²⁷ The cultural and social realities of Johnson's *Sitz-im-Leben*, obviously influenced his thinking. However, the underlying principle of the priesthood of believers that Johnson and fellow Baptists have historically practiced is valid. One can only speculate what might have happened if Baptists in the North had allowed Baptists in the Southern states to exercise their individual conscience in the matter. Greater efforts could have been made to convince by reason and through prayer. Instead, intolerance prevailed and exclusion was mandated. Baptists missed an opportunity to model a

²⁴E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland Press, 1908), 94.

²⁵Johnson, *Reminiscences*, as quoted by Woodson in *Giant in the Land*, 117.

²⁶Bill J. Leonard, *Priesthood of All Believers: Foundations of Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: The Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1989).

²⁷For a discussion of how the Bible was used to support slavery, see Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983).

peaceful resolution to a controversial issue. Perhaps, a civil war could have been averted. Is this a lesson for later generations of Baptists? Are we making the same mistakes?

Johnson's understanding of the priesthood of believers is documented in a book he published about church polity. It was published after the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention. In the Introduction of *The Gospel Developed Through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ*, Johnson wrote:

The denomination to which I have the honor to belong, holds the true fundamental principles of the gospel of Christ. These are, the sovereignty of God in the provision and application of the plan of salvation, the supreme authority of the scriptures, the right of each individual to judge for himself in his views of truth as taught in the scriptures, the independent, democratical Christocratic form of church government, the profession of religion by conscious subjects only, and other principles of scripture truth growing out of these or intimately connected with them.²⁸

Three of the five fundamentals that Johnson affirms are important to the Baptist principle called the priesthood of believers.

First, as a priest, each member of the church can interpret scripture under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Johnson cited Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:7, to show why the Spirit is for all believers--"to profit withal."²⁹ Johnson, also, defines the Spirit's purpose: "Thenceforth, he became their infallible guide in the execution of the commission received from their Lord, the Christ. This guide, says the Savior, 'shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.'"³⁰ Moreover, the responsibility of the believer is addressed. "The obligation," Johnson contends, is "to study and know all that is taught by the apostles in the New Testament appertaining to their duty."³¹

Second, the priesthood of all believers is evident in the polity of the church. Johnson writes: "In the church, the members, as brethren in Christ, are all on a footing. In this sense, the church is a democratical [sic] assembly, in which the rights of each member are respected, and by a popular vote, all business is regulated."³² Not only are all of the members of a church's voices' heard, they carry the same weight. Johnson elaborates:

All members of a church of Christ meet as equals, for they are "fellow-citizens with the saints and the household of faith," "where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all and in all." Whatever distinctions may exist between these members in society, (and distinctions there must necessarily exist,) they are not known in the church

²⁸William Bullein Johnson, *The Gospel Developed Through The Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ* (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1846), 16.

²⁹Ibid., 214.

³⁰Ibid., 190.

³¹Ibid., 191.

³²Ibid., 37.

relation, for the members of this body “are all one in Christ Jesus,” having equal rights and equal privileges.³³

Third, the principle of priesthood of believers, as Leonard maintains, is “a major factor in the Baptist understanding of salvation by faith.”³⁴ The individual is responsible for his or her faith in Christ. Baptists, therefore, reject infant baptism and maintain that only believers can receive baptism. Johnson agrees and describes church members as “penitent, believing sinners, baptized upon a profession of faith in Christ, conscious subjects, capable of being taught all things which Christ commands.”³⁵

The Baptist distinctive of the priesthood of all believers contains two important elements. First, because of their faith in Christ, all believers have direct access to God. Each believer functions as a priest for herself or himself. No other mediator but Jesus Christ is needed. As described above, this privilege and freedom is expressed in Johnson’s views on biblical interpretation, church government, and salvation. A second element is, that since all believers are called to be priests, they should minister to the world as priests in Jesus’ name. While Johnson does not address this element in *The Gospel Developed*, he does refer to it in a sermon that he delivered at the Gilead meetinghouse in South Carolina. A published copy of the manuscript survived. Addressing the responsibility of the church, he wrote:

As an individual body, independent of the control of every other body on earth, great responsibility rests on the church. Each in her respective sphere is thus charged with a solemn duty. She is the moral guardian of that sphere, and is therefore, bound to let her light shine before others, that they, seeing her good works, may glorify God in Heaven. To her, therefore, these look. In her conduct, they expect to see not only her immediate character of that Gospel, in which she professes to believe--the power and efficacy of that Redeemer, in whom she professes to place all her hope of happiness, here, and hereafter. How important the relation, that she bears to those around her. Through her, many may be saved, and through her, many may be lost. How awful her responsibility! Let her take heed to her duty.³⁶

Clearly, Johnson’s belief that every person in the church has a great responsibility is evident. He cites Matthew 5:16 to support his thinking. Each believer, a priest, has the responsibility of representing the Gospel before others in such a way that God will be known and acceptable to them.

Numerous passages can be used to support the principle of the priesthood of all believers. William Bullein Johnson utilized only a fraction of those available to him. Indeed, the principle of the priesthood of all believers is found throughout the scriptures. Eastwood agrees: “In particular phrases, in general thought-patterns, and in the intention

³³Ibid., 195.

³⁴Leonard, *Priesthood*.

³⁵Johnson, *Gospel*, 44.

³⁶William Bullein Johnson, *A church of Christ, with her officers, laws, duties, & form of government. A sermon, delivered Lord’s Day, September 22, 1844, at Gilead meeting house, Union dist., S. Carolina* (Edgefield, SC: W. F. Durisoe, 1844), 27-28.

which characterizes the whole message of the Bible, the universal priesthood is to be found.”³⁷ In light of modern scholarship, are the passages Johnson selected appropriate? How do contemporary Baptists and other Protestants interpret the scripture passages that Johnson used in his discussion on the nature of the individual’s rights and responsibilities? The remainder of this discussion now turns to this concern.

Priesthood of All Believers: A Contemporary Study

In none of Johnson’s surviving documents, does he write with the intention of proving the doctrine of priesthood of all believers. Four passages of the New Testament, however, were used by Johnson in such a way that clearly shows his understanding and support of the principle.

The first text that shows Johnson’s beliefs about this Baptist distinctive is 1 Corinthians 12:7. The apostle Paul, writing to the believers in the church at Corinth, says “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Fee sees this text as a Paul’s thesis statement for how diversity is expressed in the church. The following verses, 8-10, are then seen as examples of how this thesis is applied in the life of the church.³⁸ The thesis presents three basic ideas. First, the term “each one” (*ekasto*), is in an “emphatic first position” and therefore emphasizes the diversity that exists between believers. Second, the cause of this diversity is the “manifestation of the Spirit.” The word “manifestation” (*phanerōs*) means “revelation” or “appearance.”³⁹ Thus, what God reveals to individuals is unique and diverse. “The Spirit,” Fee contends, is therefore, “manifested in a great variety of ways.” This variety or diversity is what makes the body of Christ so special. Third, the reason for this diversity, as given by Paul is “for the common good.” Each person receives a revelation from God through the Spirit, not for individual glory or edification, but for the common good of the entire body of Christ.

Clearly, 1 Corinthians 12:7, implies that each believer is endowed with the Spirit of God. This Spirit is given to individuals that their power can be utilized “for the common good” by the community of faith. Persons, then, who have received a “manifestation,” are expected to use it well. Easily, it is acknowledged that the principle of the priesthood of believers is supported by this text. As priests, believers receive revelations from God and thereby use this information, gift, or talent to minister in a priestly fashion to the world for the good of all. While, Johnson does not elaborate all the implications of this text for his readers, his use of it in a discussion of the exercise of gifts leads one to conclude that the principle of the priesthood of all believers is assumed.

The second text of interest to this study is John 14:26. Here, Jesus tells the disciples about the role of the Paraclete (*paraklētos*). Both Bultmann⁴⁰ and Beasley-

³⁷Cyril Eastwood, *The Priesthood of All Believers* (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 160.

³⁸Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 588.

³⁹Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1245.

⁴⁰Bultmann, *John*, 626.

Murray⁴¹ interpret the Spirit's work as a continuation of Jesus' earthly ministry. The Spirit's purpose is twofold: to "teach" and to "remind." Under the Spirit's inspiration, the Apostles recorded Jesus' teachings in the New Testament. Johnson felt that believers in every age are under obligation "study and know" these teachings.⁴² This means that the Spirit's work continues in each generation. Bultmann writes: "The community's [testimony] is not a historical report, but is the witness in which Jesus' own witness is renewed; like his word, it places the hearer again and again in front of the *now* of the eschatological decision."⁴³ Thus, each community of faith is a witness to Jesus Christ and each person, of a community of faith, is responsible to carry on the mission of Christ. Thus, believers are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

A third text used by Johnson to inform each believer of his or her special rank in the household of faith is Galatians 3:28. This text is used today to emphasize the equality that exists between Christians. The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Galatia, declares, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

This verse is part of a small passage of scripture (Gal. 3:23-29) that Borchert considers to be key to Pauline thought.⁴⁴ It is unusual that several important themes of Paul's theology come together in so few verses and in the middle of the epistle. Borchert suggests: that "starting as it does at the heart of the epistle, this passage can offer perspective on other parts as one reflects on what comes before and after."⁴⁵ What comes before is the failure of legalism. What follows is a description of how believers can successfully live freely "in Christ Jesus." The passage, then, serves a transition point and looks both backward and forward.

If the passage is a "window to Pauline thought," then verse 28 is the latch on the window that unlocks all the barriers that keep believers from experiencing joyous fellowship. In verse 26, Paul had declared "all" (*Pantes*) to be sons of God through faith in Christ. Borchert describes *Pantes* and the word's position at the beginning of the sentence as a "neon sign" that stands out, not to be missed.⁴⁶ This sign forewarns readers to the radical dimensions of what a life in Christ will demand. Former distinctions of race, wealth, and gender are dissolved in the community of faith. Furthermore, Paul's apparent use of a triadic formula dramatically reverses the Jewish prayer of exclusion to the Christian ideal of inclusion.⁴⁷

Appropriately, Johnson used this text to define the equality that exists between members in a church of Jesus Christ. This understanding is an important part of the principle of the priesthood of believers. Johnson did not use this text, however, to imply that all distinctions in society should be removed. Burton concurs:

⁴¹Beasley-Murray, *John*, 261.

⁴²Johnson, *Gospel*, 191.

⁴³Bultmann, *John*, 626-627.

⁴⁴Gerald L. Borchert, "A Key to Pauline Thinking--Galatians 3:23-29: Faith and the New Humanity," *Review and Expositor* 91 (Spring 1994): 145.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., 148.

⁴⁷Ibid., 149.

It is only in the religion of Christ that Paul conceives that men can thus be brought together. That he is speaking of these distinctions from the point of view of religion is evident from the context in general, but especially from his inclusion of the ineradicable distinction of sex. The passage has nothing to do directly with the merging of nationalities or the abolition of slavery.⁴⁸

Yet, Johnson allows this text and the principle of the priesthood of all believers to inform his understanding about church leadership and ministry. He believed that both men and women should serve as deacons in the church.⁴⁹ Both sexes have special gifts that are to be exercised in the leadership and ministry of the community of faith.

The final text under examination is Matthew 5:16. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges his disciples to seek God's righteousness rather than self-righteousness. In the beginning of the sermon, Jesus uses the Beatitudes to stress dependence upon God in all situations. Jesus wants his disciples to understand the purpose for all the difficulties that lie ahead. When Jesus finishes telling the disciples about the blessings that await them, he lays a challenge before them. "Let your light shine before others," Jesus says, "so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." This challenge was given for a specific purpose. Schweizer, correctly, recognizes Jesus' motive this challenge:

Jesus' disciples are not to wallow in inferiority complexes, withdraw from the world, and let it go its arrogant way. . . . they are called to upon to perform their works, so that their God, who is strong and rich and powerful, may permeate the world. On the one hand, Jesus says to each of his disciples, "You [already] are" This sets them apart from the Old Testament people, who are told, "[if you do certain things] You *shall be* to me a royal priesthood and a holy tribe." On the other, he throws the disciples a challenge--to *be* salt and to *be* light, and that to all the world. Without the challenge, Jesus' metaphors would engender only isolationism and arrogance. The disciples are to be a church that retains firm contours and is far from identical with the world, but they are still a "church for the world."⁵⁰

Yes, believers are already members of a royal priesthood. As a priest, each believer is called to minister to the world. Works, however, are not done to draw attention to the priest but the Father.

Johnson was justified to use Matthew 5:16 to demonstrate to believers how important their ministry is to the world. Indeed, believers represent God in the world. People come to know God by viewing the actions of God's messengers. Thus, it is apparent that the Baptist distinctive called priesthood of believers existed in Johnson's thought. More importantly, the principle existed in his actions.

⁴⁸Ernest De Witt Burton, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921), 206-207.

⁴⁹Johnson, *Gospel*, 97.

⁵⁰Schweizer, *Matthew*, 103.

William Bullein Johnson served God and the Baptist denomination during an important period of crisis and transition. He was a strong supporter of both missions and education. Through his assistance, the South Carolina Baptist State Convention, the Triennial Convention, and the Southern Baptist Convention were formed. He served several churches and spent much of his life advancing the education of others. His greatest contribution was his commitment to Baptist principles, especially that principle called the priesthood of believers. Following Johnson's death, other Baptists added additional insights to this precious principle and the denomination grew and flourished. There have been recent attempts, however, to diminish this basic Baptist principle. Shall we hide our light or allow it to burn all the brighter?