

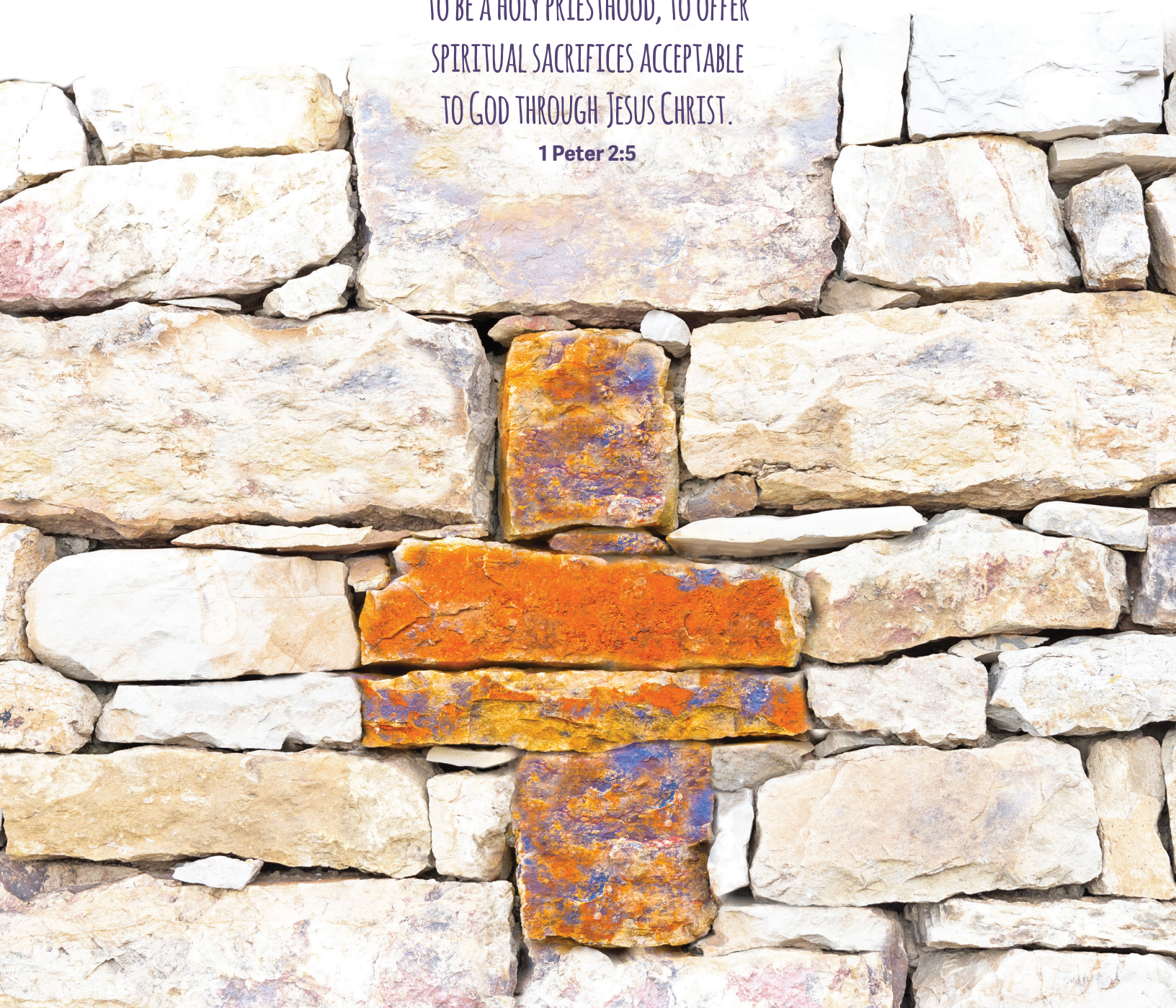
A REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND CHURCH RELATIONS  
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD SEPTEMBER 2018

# THE ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

## IDENTITY AND MISSION

YOU YOURSELVES LIKE LIVING STONES  
ARE BEING BUILT UP AS A SPIRITUAL HOUSE,  
TO BE A HOLY PRIESTHOOD, TO OFFER  
SPIRITUAL SACRIFICES ACCEPTABLE  
TO GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.

1 Peter 2:5





Abbreviations used:

- AE *Luther's Works*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols., Philadelphia and St. Louis: Augsburg and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–.
- Ap Apology of the Augsburg Confession
- ANF *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995.
- BDAG Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., ed. Frederick Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- FC SD Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration
- KW Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).
- LC Large Catechism
- LXX Septuagint
- NPNF1 *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: A Select Library of the Christian Church*, series 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).
- SA Smalcald Articles
- SC Small Catechism
- WA *D. Martin Luther's Werke*, Weimar 1883–1929
- WA-Tr *D. Martin Luther's Werke*, Tischreden

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# THE ROYAL PRIESTHOOD:

## IDENTITY AND MISSION

### Introduction

*“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” 1 Peter 2:9*

**A**T ITS 2007 CONVENTION, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod adopted Resolution 1–03, reaffirming its commitment to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers<sup>1</sup> and directing the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) to prepare a study document presenting the biblical teaching on the royal priesthood along with Luther’s doctrine of vocation “in the light of the mission challenges of today.” The resolution therefore underscored especially the role of this priesthood in witnessing to the Gospel of Christ Jesus in a fallen world.<sup>2</sup>

The 2016 Convention of the LCMS adopted Res. 5–13, “To Reaffirm Scriptural Teaching re Royal Priesthood and Office of Public Ministry.” While urging the completion of the study requested in 2007 Res. 1–03, this resolution declares: “all Christians, as chosen priests, are the possessors of the keys of the kingdom of God and are called in their Baptism to proclaim the Gospel in their daily lives.”<sup>3</sup>

The same convention also adopted Res. 13–01A, which includes the reminder that in our new birth in Baptism all Christians, as children of God in Christ Jesus His Son, possess the keys of heaven and are royal priests. Believers are, quoting Luther, “true clerics” whose identity must not be “taken away,” but should be “brought out into the open.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore all Christians are to be encouraged in the priestly calling of “evangelism and the task of outreach, as well as mercy, education, visitation, and so forth in our increasingly diverse and challenging cultural context.”<sup>5</sup> With Luther, 2016 Res. 13–01A also stresses the complementary nature of the royal priesthood with the Office of Public Ministry since “ministers [are] chosen from among us” to act “in our name.”<sup>6</sup>

Given the continuing concern expressed in the foregoing resolutions, it seems evident that the LCMS as a whole sees a need to reaffirm the doctrine and the work of the royal priesthood, especially with regard to the ongoing task of outreach to the lost. It is the hope

<sup>1</sup> Quoting the *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (1932), §30.

<sup>2</sup> The resolution directed the CTCR to work in consultation with the Board for Mission Services (now Board for International Mission), resolving that the CTCR document “be used by the whole church, its congregations and church workers, and by the LCMS seminaries and universities in instructing students about the royal priesthood, especially in its relationship to the unreached” (third resolve).

<sup>3</sup> First resolve. Res. 5–13 also affirmed a 2016 opinion of the CTCR stating that the Gospel is effectual when spoken by a layperson. (See

“Opinion on Two Questions about Laity and Clergy” at <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=4173>.)

<sup>4</sup> Fourth “whereas,” quoted from *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 38: *The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests* (1533) (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 187–88. Hereafter references to the American Edition of *Luther’s Works* will provide only the title of the work followed by the abbreviation AE with volume and page numbers, e.g., *The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests*, AE 38:187–88.

<sup>5</sup> Second resolve.

<sup>6</sup> Fourth “whereas,” from *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520), AE 44:127.

and prayer of the Commission that this study will be a useful tool for individuals and congregations toward the goal of reaffirming the royal priesthood of all Christians and be an encouragement for every Christian to proclaim “the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 PETER 2:9B) according to one’s callings.

This study document seeks to highlight the special identity of Christians, for, very simply, the royal priesthood is the Christian Church. Scripture unfolds in various ways the new identity of those whom God has made His own in Baptism.<sup>7</sup> The Holy Spirit’s work of regeneration is rich and expansive, beyond simple formulas, for it is a whole new thing, a work of new creation (2 COR. 5:17; GAL. 6:15). He is re-creating by His grace those whom He has created and put into this world in a variety of roles to accomplish His purposes and to show forth and speak of that saving love in Christ. In short, the goal is to remind us of who we are and in whom we live and move and have our being (ACTS 17:28), and what that then means as we go about our new life in Christ. Toward that goal, the language of priesthood is particularly rich and worthy of our study.

The doctrine of the royal priesthood and the priestly vocation of “ordinary Christians” arises from Lutheran Reformation theology with such force that some may think these ideas began with Martin Luther and the other Reformers. The emphasis certainly becomes large in Luther’s time, virtually exploding in his thought and on the scene, but only because he encountered and engaged a misplaced emphasis on other aspects of church, priest and priesthood. The Reformation was not innovating but rather reviving ideas as old as God’s first call to sinners. While most at the dawn of the Reformation associated “priest” and “priesthood” with the Old Testament tribe of Levi or with ordained clergy in the New Testament church, the Reformation recognized and then emphasized that in both the Old and New Testament Scriptures “priest” really applied to all who are made new by the promises of God in the Messiah promised and in the Messiah who has come.

<sup>7</sup> “Royal priesthood” is one title among many for the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic — the Christian — Church. Other titles include “disciples” (MATT. 28:19); “flock of Christ” (LUKE 12:32); “body of Christ” (1 COR. 12); “saints” (EPH. 1:1); “God’s household” (EPH. 2:19); “people of God” (HEB. 4:9); “holy nation” or “holy priesthood” (1 PETER 2:4–10); “kingdom of God” (REV. 5:10); “bride of Christ” (REV. 21:9).

Before proceeding with our study, we want to prevent a potential misunderstanding of this document. An emphasis on the royal priesthood and the work of the baptized proclaiming the excellencies of God may lead some to assume that there is no need for the ministry (for the office of publicly preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments on behalf of the church). If there is no precise equivalent of a Levitical priesthood in the New Testament Church, as we will show, is there any Office of Public Ministry? Is such a thing necessary when there is a vibrant priesthood of all the baptized? There should be no doubt about the affirmative answers to these questions. Yes, the New Testament not only speaks of the calling of all believers to share the Gospel, but it also speaks emphatically and frequently of the divine institution and necessity of a particular, designated office. All teach in their own way, but not all are — or should be — teachers or preachers or pastors or bishops for the “public” proclamation and administration of the Gospel on behalf of the Church or its congregations (EPH. 4:11; JAMES 3:1; 1 COR. 12:29).<sup>8</sup> Our Synod has emphatically articulated the proper understanding of the Office of Public Ministry and nothing that we say herein should be assumed to be in opposition to that doctrine. The royal priesthood and the Office of Public Ministry are not in conflict with one another.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> “Public” in the term “Office of the Public Ministry” is used in a particular manner. While the adjective “public” most commonly implies a setting open to all, in other references the term public (Latin: *publice*) implies action “for the community as a whole” (see *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, 2018, at [https://www.dictionary.com/browse/public?s=t,2nd definition](https://www.dictionary.com/browse/public?s=t,2nd%20definition)). It is in this sense that we speak of public ministry. One in the Office of the Public Ministry acts on behalf of and with the consent of the whole.

<sup>9</sup> The LCMS has addressed the matter of the Office of the Public Ministry on numerous occasions, most notably by adopting Walther’s theses on *Church and the Office of the Ministry* [Office] (in 1851 and again in 2001). See *The Church and the Office of the Ministry: Kirche und Amt; The Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Office* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012). In addition, we note several CTCR reports pertaining to ministry: *The Ministry in Its Relation to the Christian Church* (1973); *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature* (1981); *Theology and Practice of the Divine Call* (2003).

## I. THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

*“You yourselves have seen ... how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Exodus 19:4–6*

**W**HEN THEY HEAR THE WORD “priest,” most people will probably think of the minister of a Roman Catholic, or maybe Episcopal, church. And, if we grew up in Sunday school, the combination of “Old Testament” and “priest” may conjure up the image from one of our lessons of a stately, bearded figure in exotic garb — a priest from the tribe of Levi. Perhaps the priest is standing at an altar, sacrificing a lamb or other offering, and in the background either a tabernacle or temple may be depicted. Such images fit with the definitions of priest that one finds in a standard dictionary. The basic understanding of priest one will find there is “a minister of any religion.”

Peter’s reference to God’s sons and daughters as “a royal priesthood” (1 PETER 2:9) rests on a rich background with deep roots in God’s dealing with His Old Testament people. But it is not the background we have just sketched — those individual priests who lead worship. As Israel came to Sinai, before the Lord gave His Law or established the Levitical priesthood with all its responsibilities for leading Israel’s worship, He charged Moses:

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and **you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**” (Ex. 19:3–6, emphasis added)

The royal priesthood therefore has its explicit beginning with the people of God in the Old Testament before there were any of the Levitical priests we tend to associate with Old Testament priesthood. However, before we address the details of the “royal priesthood,” it is important to know what a priest is. The first priest to be mentioned by that title in Scripture is the mysterious Melchizedek, “priest of God Most High,” who blessed Abram in God’s name and supplied him with bread and wine (GEN. 14:17–20). As priesthood then unfolds in the Old Testament, we see that it is a work of mediation: offering “gifts and sacrifices for sin” (e.g., LEV. 6:1–7; CP. HEB. 5:1), offering supplication and prayer (e.g., EZRA 9:5–15; CP. HEB. 5:7), and proclaiming God’s blessings (DEUT. 27:9–28:68; MAL. 2:1–7; HEB. 7:1).

Luther summarizes this well:

According to the way the Scriptures picture him, a priest is a person whom God has ordained and commanded to mediate between God and men. That is to say, *a priest comes from God and brings us His Word and doctrine; again, he presents himself to God to sacrifice and pray for us.* Hence the priestly office consists of three parts: to teach or preach God’s Word, to sacrifice, and to pray. All three of these functions are abundantly referred to in the Scriptures.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Sermon on Psalm 110, AE 13:315; emphasis added. Note also this characterization of the priest’s function: “The essential function of the Levitical priesthood is therefore to assure, maintain, and constantly re-establish the holiness of the elect people of God (cf. Ex. 28:38; Lev. 10:17; Num. 18:1)” (“Priests and Levites,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* vol. 4 [Nashville: Abingdon, 1962], 877–78).

Given this threefold mediatorial work — sacrifice, prayer and proclamation — we can see the priesthood at work already long before Sinai, before the declaration of Israel’s royal priesthood and before the establishment of the Levitical priesthood with its many responsibilities for Israel’s worship. Luther sees this clearly, remarking on Genesis 4:3, where the first sacrifice of Scripture is mentioned:

In the first place, we are reminded here that Adam and Eve, as pious parents, preached often and much to their children about the will and worship of God, inasmuch as both bring an offering to God.<sup>11</sup>

Then Luther draws a direct connection to the priesthood:

But in connection with this passage let the reader ponder the following, above all: Adam and Eve are not only parents, nor do they merely provide for their children and educate them for this present life; but *they also perform the office of priests*. Inasmuch as they are filled with the Holy Spirit and are enlightened by the knowledge of Christ, who is to come, they set before their children this very hope of a future deliverance and exhort them to show their gratitude to so merciful a God. It is evident that the sacrifices which were handed down had no other purpose.<sup>12</sup>

Abel’s sacrifice and, later, Noah’s were priestly thank offerings (GEN. 4:4 AND 8:20).<sup>13</sup> The promise to Abram included the assurance that the blessing of God would be *mediated* to all nations through him and his family. Abraham himself offered a priestly sacrifice in the lamb provided by Yahweh Himself, thereby redeeming Isaac (GEN. 22) and, through Him, preserving the messianic line whose Seed would redeem the world (see GAL. 3:16). Throughout the Genesis story, the people of God

engaged in the priestly work of prayer and proclamation as they, on the one hand, responded in prayer and intercession to the Lord God who had called them to Himself (e.g., GEN. 18:16–33; 20:17; 21:14–21; 24:42–45; 25:21; 32:9–12) and, on the other hand, passed along His promises and expectations to future generations (see especially GEN. 24:6–8; also Jacob’s blessing of his sons in GEN. 49).

Thus, although God applied the particular title “priests” to His people in Exodus 19 (the formal Levitical priesthood would be established several chapters later for specific work), His kingdom of priests had been carrying on priestly work as long as God had been working both with and for sinners, that is, as long as God had been working to redeem people and to show to others His gracious will. Although the term “priest” is not used, the role and work are still there. In all of this, the priestly work is not meritorious — as if the patriarchal family earned its status by its own inherent holiness. No, the frank record of the patriarchal narratives reveals these men and their families as sinners. Rather than a record of moral super-humans, Scripture reveals the Lord at work, graciously providing and calling.

God’s calling *all* Israel His priests in Exodus 19, then, is also making plain that this status as His special people came not on their account, but because *He* had set *them* apart. *He* had brought all Israel literally out of slavery and to Himself. He had freed them, not just from Egypt but also from themselves and their sin. They were freed to live in sacrificial service, worship, and witness to Him.<sup>14</sup> There was no priesthood — and no life — apart from God. All they were and would do was in response — not “to become His people,” but “because they were His people.”

Key to this response was not simply public worship and thankful praise. Praise stemmed from the *whole of the lives* of the people of Israel as holy priests, set apart from the surrounding nations (EX. 19:5). They would also stand apart, not only as a “great nation” (GEN. 12:2), but also as a “holy nation” (EX. 19:6).

While we focus on Israel as God’s special people therefore, it would be a mistake to think that God’s promises existed only for Israel. Although the people of Israel had been singled out and brought out of Egypt, the promises of salvation stretched beyond Israel, and were

<sup>11</sup> *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5*, AE 1:246

<sup>12</sup> *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5*, AE 1:247 (emphasis added).

<sup>13</sup> Luther compares Abel and Cain as priests, noting that, outwardly, Cain’s sacrifice might be more impressive: “But the verdict of the Epistle to the Hebrews is different; it declares that because of his faith Abel brought the more excellent offering (HEB. 11:4). So the fault lay not in the materials which were offered but in the person of him who brought the offering. The faith of the individual was the weight which added value to Abel’s offering, but Cain spoiled his offering. Abel believes that God is good and merciful. For this reason his sacrifice is pleasing to God. Cain, on the contrary, puts his trust in the prestige of his primogeniture; but he despises his brother as an insignificant and worthless being. What, then, is God’s decision? He gives to the first-born the position of one born later, and to the one born later He gives the position of the first-born. He looks toward Abel’s offering and shows that the sacrifice of this priest pleases Him, but that Cain does not please Him and is not a true priest” (*Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5*, AE 1:251).

<sup>14</sup> Note Exodus 7:16: “And you shall say to him [Pharaoh], ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, “Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness. But so far, you have not obeyed.”’”



offered to all who would take God at His Word.<sup>15</sup> As His priests, Israel itself would serve as a mediator: a beacon and lamp to all the nations. Isaiah 61:5–6 says as much. “Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks; foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers; *but you shall be called the priests of the LORD; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God*” (emphasis added). Psalm 145:10–12 also attests to such a role filled by all the faithful of Israel:

All you have made will thank you, LORD;  
The faithful will bless you.  
They will speak of the glory of your kingdom  
and will declare your might,  
informing all people of your mighty acts  
and of the glorious splendor of your kingdom.  
(CSB)

All of this is necessary for an accurate consideration of priesthood in the Old Testament and for the recognition that priestly work exists apart from the term.<sup>16</sup> In Exodus 19 God called Israel first a “kingdom,” that is, a people gathered and organized by Him and in Him as their King (Ex. 15:17–18), the King who is over all nations. And, with its reference to a whole people, Exodus 19’s concept of “priest” reaches beyond the Sunday school image and is richly freighted with the theology that laid a foundation for Israel of old, and then reverberates through the New Testament royal priesthood of 1 Peter 2. To ignore the wider ideas and meaning risks at least impoverishing, if not distorting, our understanding of what God would have us know about who His people have been and who they now are. Mindful of this identity we then see what God would have them — and us — to do.

When God called all of Israel His kingdom of priests in Exodus 19, He made clear that their noble identity was graciously bestowed — a reality that continues whenever God adds to His “great cloud of witnesses” (HEB. 12:1). The undeserved kindness and mercy — the sheer grace of God — which is taught from the time of the Fall (GEN. 3:15) is made certain also in Exodus 19: *God initi-*

*ates, He promises, He forgives, He redeems.* As is seen constantly and consistently in the Scriptures, salvation verbs and redemption motifs have God as the actor, the doer, with people being acted upon. No status is achieved from the bottom up. Thus, priesthood in Scripture, of whatever sort, is also a gift, a blessing graciously bestowed on people called into a relationship with Him *to carry out His will*, to be *His* instruments — “no one takes this honor for himself” (HEB. 5:4).

“Carry out” — carry out a task, carry out God’s will, etc. — is the language of a servant. God names His people priests in a gracious bestowal by His initiative. In this identity He also calls them to meaningful life. Indeed, the “priests” are to serve God’s good purposes. Biblically speaking, to serve can be a form of worship. So the priests are God’s own “treasured possession” who hear His voice and keep His covenant (Ex. 19:5). A priest hears and keeps covenant, and he never stands alone for he serves within the covenant people. There is service to the One who made priests what they are, and service not to self but to all others within the covenant. And as the people of God, they were servants and mediators of God’s salvation to the world. Toward others, the priest’s most important task was to teach, broadly speaking — that is, to bear witness to that God-created identity with one’s life and to declare what God has and continues to do both for that “priest” and for others God would have in that number.

This teaching work has been there since Genesis when what God said and did was given to Adam and Eve to remember and repeat. They too were priests as they carried out work and carried forth God’s revelation — as they served in both a narrow and broad sense of liturgy.<sup>17</sup> They were priests as were any and all who faithfully echoed the same in the generations that followed. Such worship says back to God what He says to us as it confesses faith and then boldly petitions His benefits. Saying the message, the promises, to others is also God’s work, also liturgy, broadly speaking. This relationship and work is also sacrificial in a broad sense, remembering and handing on what God gave in His giving of grace and mercy, serving as priests both before and beyond anything strictly Levitical. It is a sacrifice made in joy that enriches, not impoverishes, those who give in service.

<sup>15</sup> That was God’s intent from the beginning of Israel’s story. See GEN. 12:3; also EX. 12:48–49; NUM. 9:14; 15:13–16; 1 KINGS 8:41–43; IS. 56:6–8; 60:1–3; and examples: Rahab (JOSH. 2 AND 6), Ruth (RUTH 1–4), and the Ninevites (JONAH 1–4). Deuteronomy 4:6–8 provides the intended reaction of the nations to Israel’s witness.

<sup>16</sup> As noted above, on pages 3 and 4. Similarly, the Trinity exists and is at work whether or not the term is present. We will return to this important distinction between priest and function/work.

<sup>17</sup> Melancthon’s commentary on the term “liturgy” is valuable here, for it shows that the word need not be understood only narrowly in purely cultic terms. Ap XXIV 78–88, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 272–74. Hereafter KW.



In Exodus 19 God seeks to convince Israel of this priestly identity. Yet, even when God plainly calls them His kingdom of priests, Israel hesitates. In Exodus 20, Moses is still asked by Israel to intervene. As the people say to Moses (verse 19): “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” They rightly acknowledge or confess their inability to stand before God on their own. Such cowering is perhaps understandable. Who were they to stand before such a God? But this was not something they had taken into their own hands. Rather God had invited and established the relationship. They did not wrest such an identity from God. He bestowed it, calling them a kingdom of priests. It is truly good news for those people God chooses and makes His own, but it also intimidates.

A few chapters later Israel would have a priesthood established from the tribe of Levi, priests who served as go-betweens or mediators in formal worship. The entire tribe would maintain the Tabernacle and its environs, serving as the substitutes for the first-born sons (NUM. 3:12–13; DEUT. 10:8). From among the Levites, Aaron and his sons were to offer up the people’s daily and yearly sacrifices (EX. 28; LEV. 1:7–8). And the high priest alone would stand in for the entire people making yearly atonement for all sins in the Holy of Holies (EX. 28:29; LEV. 16:32–34). But these priests were not only to look one way toward God; they also looked the other way as well to the people, to those around, reminding Israel of their present relationship and the work of the Messiah still to come. As they offered sacrifices they also taught (see DEUT. 33:10), for Israel’s worship was thoroughly instructive — given by God and making Him known within Israel and through Israel to the nations round about.

In fact, what the Levitical priests were doing formally and publicly was also what all Israel had actually been established to do daily and constantly. Recall again the priestly work recorded in Genesis: Noah (8:20), Abram (13:18), Abraham (renamed — 21:33). What these giants of faith had done for their families and as a witness to all who saw, the formal Levitical priesthood would also do in a public worship setting. Yet the Levitical responsibilities did not put an end to that identity and work given to the entire kingdom of priests in Exodus 19.

Thus, we can see the “*both — and*” nature of the priesthood: (a) All Israel was called to priestly standing before God and for mediation especially on behalf of their future generations and on behalf of the surrounding nations, the Gentiles; but internally (b) there were priests from within Israel who mediated on behalf of

Israel, administering the sacrifices of forgiveness and grace, proclaiming and teaching and praying. It was all priestly service of God and to people done in different places and ways.

From the start, God’s revelation to His people was a revelation of grace, and their identity rested on that continuing favor of God. It was sealed with God’s pledge of faithfulness in the Covenant. But along the way, there are pitfalls, perhaps the greatest of which is forgetting on what this relationship rests. Thus Israel all too easily could flatter themselves, thinking they possessed something inherent that had drawn God to them and caused them to be chosen by Him (see DEUT. 7:6–8). The attitude is human and perennial. Luther noted as much in his Heidelberg Theses #28: “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.”<sup>18</sup> A more colloquial version of Luther’s point: We *are* not lovable but are *made* lovable by God who loves.

In addition, the people risked misunderstanding their identity as a privilege exclusive to them and meant for no one else. As the Old Testament sadly recounts, Old Israel seemed too often to forget that they were no people until God had made them who they were by grace and kept them the same way. Hearing the warnings of the temptations posed by the false gods of the nations and well aware of the brutal reality of Gentile sin, they lost track of the promise that the gracious blessing that brought into being the family of the patriarchs — their family! — would result in blessing for all the nations (GEN. 12:1–3; 26:4–5). The Old Testament story only occasionally indicates any recognition by God’s people that they were to be about a universal mission with a very specific message.

One further element pertaining to priesthood in the Old Testament is vital for our consideration. The history of priestly service by Israel, both as a kingdom of priests and by the ordained Levitical priests, is a history of failure and, often, rank apostasy.<sup>19</sup> Thus, all of Israel’s

<sup>18</sup> AE 31:41.

<sup>19</sup> One of the clearest examples of priestly apostasy is the case of Eli’s sons (1 SAM. 2). God’s judgment is a revocation of the divine promise to continue the Aaronic priesthood through Eli (vv. 30–36). Augustine suggests that the installation of Samuel was only a partial fulfillment of the prophecy to Eli and that its entire fulfillment would come only in Christ and His priesthood: “No one who looks at these prophecies with the eye of faith could fail to see that they have been fulfilled. For now, to be sure, no tabernacle has been left to the Jews, no temple, no altar, no sacrifice and, it follows, no priesthood” (*Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson [New York: Penguin Books, 1972], 17.5.725).

serving rested on the foundational relationship of God's promise of a faithful "Servant" of the Lord (Is. 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12) who would fulfill the service Israel could not achieve. The Servant's faithfulness would entail suffering and, as such, a priestly service, but not in the way of Aaron. The Servant would suffer in *self-sacrifice* — offering *Himself* for sin (Is. 53:10), silent as a lamb (53:7), bearing all griefs, sorrows, transgressions, iniquities, and chastisement (53:4-5) for "the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (53:6).

The need for that Servant is implicit in the proclamation of Law and judgment by the Lord's prophets, from Moses to Malachi. And the promises of the Servant refer to Him by many titles and references in addition to "Servant." The Word promises the Seed of Eve (GEN. 3:15), Son and Offspring of the patriarchs (GEN. 12:3; 17:19; 28:14), Ruler from Judah and Bethlehem (GEN. 49:10; MICAH 5:2), Prophet like Moses (DEUT. 18:15-18), eternal King (2 SAM. 7:12-13), Immanuel (Is. 7:14), Son of Man (DAN. 7:13-14), He who does God's will (Ps. 40:6-8) and, of course, the Messiah — the Anointed of David (1 KINGS 2:4; JER. 23:5-6; 33:14-18; Is. 11:1; EZEK. 34:20-24).

Yet one more title for the promised Davidic Servant must be mentioned. As implied by Isaiah's Servant title, he is also Priest, "a priest forever." We earlier referred to Melchizedek's mysterious appearance in Genesis 14. He reappears in one of the psalter's great Messianic psalms, Psalm 110, where he is declared to be the pattern for the *Lord* and eternal royal priest who sits at the Lord's own right hand.<sup>20</sup> It will be in the royal Priest after the order of Melchizedek that all God's promises find their fulfillment.

While the Hebrew language does not have tenses *per se* — no past, present, and future as in English — the translations do well when they capture a future sense, a forward-looking vantage point. So when Exodus 19 is rendered "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests," we are told, in effect, that while God had acted to get the people to that point, He was not finished working and things were not over and done with. While Israel surely was God's, the people, like God Himself, were pointing forward, as the promises of the Servant Messiah were still to be fulfilled. In Him — the eternal royal Priest — God's call of Israel as a royal priesthood is to be resolved in the universal priesthood of all justified believers, old and new.

<sup>20</sup> Acts reminds us that this psalm cannot be about David (2:34-36). All potential confusion is erased when the author of Hebrews clearly identifies the Lord Jesus as the One who fills the order of Melchizedek with its full glory as the "Great High Priest" (see HEB. 5:5-10; 6:19-7:17).



## II. “PRIEST” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

*“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” 1 Peter 2:9*

**THAT FULFILLMENT HAS COME.** It is the coming of the Servant, the Seed, the Son and Offspring, and, yes, the Prophet, King and eternal Priest. His coming, following on God’s promise, is the good word of Gospel, for He is God with us as anointed Son of Man, serving and saving people. His coming is the fulfillment of every promise to Israel, the righteousness that Israel failed to offer, the atonement that every other sacrifice anticipated, the victory over death and every evil, and the mighty rule that alone achieves the longed-for kingdom.

So it is that God serves and that His people also serve as His priests, living in witness, teaching the need for God’s mercy and saving promises. The work promised in the Servant who is King and Priest creates the kingdom of priests. Their priestly service is forever grounded in Him. He makes His people to be what they are: “Wherefore we are priests, as he is Priest, sons as he is Son, kings as he is King.”<sup>21</sup>

### 1. Promises Fulfilled

To speak of “new” and “old” implies contrast, but it leaves open the kind of contrast. It might contrast error and truth — old, false ideas versus truths that are now evident. The contrast of Old and New Testaments is not of that sort. When we look at “priests” and “priesthood” now in the New Testament, some aspects remain the same, while others are significantly different. This is the *New Testament*. It is new not as a correction of falsehood, however, but one of promise (prophecy) and

fulfillment. The New Testament makes plain the preparatory character of the Old Testament.

The *New Testament* is utterly dependent upon Christ, the fulfillment of the *Old* in all its parts. So Luke 24:44–47:

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

“You are a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” declares Peter, speaking in the present tense as he refers to promises fulfilled! In the Old Testament, God had made Himself known to His people in the foundational work of creation, then in His mighty acts of deliverance, in His election of Israel as His covenant people, and in His messianic promises of the One who would be Prophet (DEUT. 18:15), Priest (PS. 110:4) and King (PS. 2). In all this and more, God acted in grace and mercy. The people of Israel were called to be His royal priests entirely because of God’s gracious character, not on account of their virtue or merit. The Old Testament’s royal priesthood was thus grounded entirely in God’s gracious provision, in His redemptive work and in His promises — which is to say that the royal priesthood of old is the people of God redeemed by grace through faith alone, just as the whole of life for the New Testament priesthood is also grounded entirely in grace.

<sup>21</sup> *On the Ministry*, AE 40:20.

Nevertheless, it is true that in the New Testament there is “a new and different kind of priesthood.”<sup>22</sup> What is “new” in the New Testament? Most simply, it is Christ. The New Testament priesthood is defined entirely in light of *Christ*, who is the great High Priest. Hebrews 3:1–2 says, “Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God’s house.”

- The *great* High Priest of the New Testament, Christ Jesus, is the eternal Priest who comes to offer the one, full atoning sacrifice that countless Old Testament sacrifices could only anticipate.
- In “the high priest of our confession,” we “share in a heavenly calling” with Him to a priesthood now conferred not by membership in the covenant with Abraham and his family line, but in the covenant of Baptism intended for all nations.
- In Christ, this new priesthood and heavenly calling is not focused on Israel or its sacrifices, but on proclaiming the Gospel of Christ’s sacrifice for all people.

## 2. The Great High Priest

The complete and final revelation of God comes in the Word made flesh — in Jesus, the Christ. Israel had glimpsed flashes of God’s redemptive love all through its history, even as the people often strayed from the covenant. God held to His promises to them as His kingdom of priests. But now the time of glimpses was over with the coming of the Redeemer.

In the Messiah promised of old, the Light of the World has come as promised (Is. 58:8; 60:1; JOHN 1:9; 9:5), with light for Israel *and* for the Gentiles (LUKE 2:32). He is the true Light enlightening everyone and everything (JOHN 1:9; 1 JOHN 2:8). One of the Levitical priests rejoiced in the Messiah’s advent: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,” sang Zechariah as he gave thanks for the “sunrise” that gives “light to those that sit in darkness and the shadow of death” (LUKE 1:68–69, 78–79). But most of Israel allowed itself to be blinded by a shadow, so to

speak. That which had once been a help to teach and remind of the focus of God’s promise became an end in itself, a burden to conscience. Colossians 2:17 speaks of old covenant rituals as a shadow of things to come. Indeed, as Hebrews 10:1 indicates, the Old Testament priesthood and its work was a shadow as well. Shadows are not the entire sum and substance of a thing, but they do give an indication, an outline or idea of what the thing is like. They serve to point to the substance itself. So it is worth looking at the shadow, but it is also essential to keep looking closely for the thing itself. However, in large measure, Israel forsook the substance for the shadow.

Israel as a whole was called by God from among the nations. The Levites were then called from among the twelve tribes. Then, from among the tribe of Levi, the Levitical priests were in turn called. Lastly, the one high priest was anointed from among the other priests.<sup>23</sup> By this representative arrangement, then, they were all a part of the people and so could rightly speak to them even as they would represent them before God and, in turn, mediate God’s salvation to others (GEN. 12:3; EX. 19:4–6; IS. 49:6; 60:1–3; MAL. 2:7–9). When they offered sacrifices, thanks, and praise to God, they offered what would always be flawed as it arose from them; still, God graciously promised to accept this service as perfect. In a sense, the entire role of the Levitical tribe culminated in the representative work of the high priest.<sup>24</sup> Hebrews 5:1–3 says as much: “Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.”

The high priests, together with the entire Levitical system, were but shadows of the coming perfect Priest, the complete Mediator who would offer sacrifice once for all. The Great High Priest, Christ Jesus, perfectly fulfilled

<sup>23</sup> The Levites as a whole were substitutes for the firstborn sons of Israel (and thereby for each family). They provided general service in the tabernacle or temple (NUM. 3:12–13). Aaron and his descendants served as priests, leading the people in the daily, yearly and special sacrifices (LEV. 1:7–8) of life in Israel. The high priest Aaron, and then those individuals selected after him beginning with Eleazar, alone entered the Most Holy Place on the yearly Day of Atonement to atone for the sins of *all* Israel (EX. 28:29; LEV. 16:32–34).

<sup>24</sup> So the high priest Caiaphas, though he did not believe in Jesus the Messiah, nevertheless prophesied truthfully in accord with his office as high priest about Christ’s vicarious death for Israel and the world (JOHN 11:49–52).

<sup>22</sup> *Sermon on Psalm 110* (1535), AE 13:306. Luther’s extended “sermon” on this psalm was preached over eight weeks. Throughout his comments, he sees the psalm in its proper, messianic light.



the covenant in all its parts by His humble obedience to all the Law's demands (ROM. 5:19; 2 COR. 5:21; GAL. 4:4–5; 1 JOHN 3:5), atoning for the sins of all the people, entering alone into the Holy Place. He fulfills, but also supersedes the old in His *New Testament* priesthood. He is not as of old from Levi's line. He is without sin, obedient even to "death on a cross" (PHIL. 2:8), and His atoning sacrifice is not merely for Israel's sins against the covenant, but for the sins of the world. It is not offered at Jerusalem's temple and it is not a sacrifice from the flocks or fields of Israel. This Priest offers Himself! He is both the sinless Lamb and the holy Priest so that He bears "our sins in his body on the tree" (1 PETER 2:24), where He accepts the Law's curse of disobedience as He hangs in sacrifice (DEUT. 21:23; GAL. 3:12–13). And now, risen from the dead and exalted to God's right hand, He intercedes as our eternal High Priest (PS. 110; HEB. 7:23–25).

With Christ, the great High Priest, the temple and its priesthood has finished its task. Jesus alludes to this in speaking with the Samaritan woman in John 4:21–24:

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

All priesthood is made clear only in Christ Jesus, the great High Priest, and His work.<sup>25</sup> His radical mercy is the cornerstone for the new age, but it became a stumbling block for many (ROM. 9:32–33; 1 COR. 1:23; 1 PETER 2:8) when "he came to his own and his own people did not receive him" (JOHN 1:11). They preferred the shadow of the Old Testament's sinful, weak priests and all the old rhythms and rituals over the sinless Servant-Priest whose deep sympathy for sinners results in complete and eternal redemption (HEB. 4:15; 9:12). The failure of many in Israel to see and embrace the Messiah was tied to their misunderstanding of their own election. Their election had been as priestly mediators, for intercession, for service, and to show forth the promise of God's love and mercy in their own lives to others. Their election pointed to the very Servant King and Priest that they rejected.

<sup>25</sup> Norman Nagel emphasizes this theme in Luther's writing on the royal priesthood. See "Luther and the Priesthood of All Believers," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (October 1997): 277–98.

But those from Israel who did not believe betrayed Israel's identity as a kingdom of priests when they refused this new revelation of God speaking in the person of His Son (HEB. 1:1–2). They deluded themselves into thinking that they were the end of what God was about instead of a tool through which He worked for all the world, enslaving themselves in pride. "We are Abraham's children and have never been enslaved to anyone," they protested when Jesus promised Himself and His freedom (JOHN 8). They were held fast by their own mistaken notions that old promises would do just fine, while they ignored the Promise Incarnate, whose present promises were what fulfilled God's saving intent for all the world. In denying their own Savior they could not share His gracious presence with the nations — could not be the priests they were called to be.

Like the priests of old, the great High Priest is called by God who alone calls priests. Our High Priest comes, not by usurpation, but by the Father's anointing (HEB. 1:9; 5:4). In Psalm 2:7, the king speaks at the anointing: "The LORD said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you.'" And in Psalm 110 Yahweh declares David's Lord to be the eternal royal Priest after the order of Melchizedek. The New Testament rightly applies all this to Christ, the Son of God, the Seed of Adam, of Abraham and of David (MATT. 1; ROM. 1:1–5), who was appointed for this priestly service from the very beginning (GEN. 3:15; 1 PETER 1:18–20; EPH. 1:3–4). He is the only-begotten Son of the Father, now humble no more but higher than the angels because He has been raised from the dead and exalted to God's right hand (ACTS 13:33; COL. 3:1; HEB. 1:13).

His identity and work are not seized in some *coup*, but bestowed by the Father. He alone has been named by God to be Priest forever after "the order of Melchizedek" (HEB. 5:6). And like the Priest of Psalm 110, He is also a king, but with a kingdom not of this world, yet far greater than any of this world (JOHN 18:36). He comes as obedient king in all humility and lays rightful claim to His title and reign as the Servant King of Isaiah's and Zechariah's prophecies (IS. 49:5–7; 52:13–53:12; ZECH. 9:9; JOHN 12:12–16).

### 3. Priesthood in the New Covenant

The coming together of all these roles and works is magnificent, all tied up in Christ. Old Israel had been a nation of priests, called to point to what God would do. The true Israel, the Messiah Jesus, is priest and mediator, restoring all things to the Father, and giving the benefits of His sacrifice, His service, to the new Israel, His new

people, the Church, His royal priesthood. As His new people we “consider” our priesthood in light of “Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession” through whom we “share in a heavenly calling” (HEB. 3:1–2). Our High Priest provides redemption in the new covenant He made, sealed with His own sacrifice, coupled with His promise: “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (LUKE 22:20). Covenants are agreements or pacts made between two parties, each putting something into the relationship. But people cannot initiate a covenant with God, because they have nothing to offer Him. This covenant is a sign of grace, yet one more gift of God whose benefits can be had only by faith. Beggars can’t be choosers, but could one choose any better? This covenant came at the highest price — the death of Christ Himself — with the cost paid entirely by one party. Yet there is a free exchange in the covenant. What was ours — sin, death, and condemnation — becomes Christ’s. And what is His — holiness, life, and a perfect, eternal relationship with the Father — becomes ours. “For all things are yours ... and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 COR. 3:21, 23). This is a “happy exchange” — one of Luther’s favorite descriptions of salvation.<sup>26</sup>

This new covenant accomplishes what the old covenant could not do with its repeated sacrifices. Christ Himself *is* the new covenant, both priest and final sacrifice. From this point on, priesthood rests on the blood of Christ and on His resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God where He intercedes for us. “The gospel and all of Scripture present Christ as the high priest, who alone and once for all by offering himself has taken away the sins of all men and accomplished their

sanctification for all eternity.”<sup>27</sup> His sacrifice, given in grace and love and received by faith, is *representative*, *perfect* and *universal*. Those are three important adjectives. The sacrifice, first, is representative like those of the old covenant because Christ stands in for me and every sinner, the vicar or substitute whose life, death and resurrection are mine. Second, unlike the old covenant sacrifices, this sacrifice is perfect because He is the sinless only-begotten Son whose death is full atonement for sin. There are no more sacrifices to come. And third, it is universal, that is, it is salvation won for all. Just as Israel’s relationship with God was not exclusively theirs, so the relationship of the new covenant is not the private possession of some, but is open to all who receive in faith what God bestows. The priesthood of the believers under the new covenant is still one of faith and sacrifice, but the orientation has radically changed, for the Messiah long promised has come.

One aspect of the change in orientation is this: Based on God’s past actions and promises, Israel of old looked forward to this great day, and now the New Israel looks back at what the True Israel, Christ, has accomplished. Yet, because of what Christ has already accomplished, the New Israel also looks forward in eager anticipation for the fulfillment of His promised return as He raises the dead, judges all people and establishes the new heaven and earth. Moreover, this different aspect could be misunderstood to imply that God saved the Old Testament people in a different manner than He saves people now. God always has worked to save people the same way: by promise. The Word saves. The Word creates and defines the identity of those who believe, who are saved. The Word makes them what they are. Faith is trust in God’s promises — it is always the same. Faith trusts the promises of what Christ accomplishes for all people in every age when He died — or would die — on the cross. Already in the Old Testament God saw Jesus’ death and resurrection as reality, so He has always saved by Christ’s work. The promise began with Genesis 3:15 with more promises accumulating along the way. Note, however, that what counts is clinging in faith to the promises given at the moment to the hearer at hand. So Adam and Eve had a promise and were saved not potentially but in fact then and there by holding fast to that promise in faith. Noah had his own promise. He could not be content to know Adam’s, but he had a word of God to him, a promise then and there that, when grasped in faith, did save him. The same held true for Abraham and Sarah,

<sup>26</sup> For example, Luther writes in *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520): “The third incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [EPH. 5:31–32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage — indeed the most perfect of all marriages, since human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage — it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly, *the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own*. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits. *Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ’s, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul’s; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride’s and bestow upon her the things that are his*. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?” (AE 31:351, emphasis added). Also: “By this fortunate exchange with us He took upon Himself our sinful person and granted us His innocent and victorious Person. Clothed and dressed in this, we are freed from the curse of the Law, because Christ Himself voluntarily became a curse for us” (*Lectures on Galatians*, AE 26:284).

<sup>27</sup> *Concerning the Ministry*, AE 40:14.



for David, for the prophets and Israel and for those at the time of Christ.

That is still true in the new covenant. The rituals and sacrifices tied to the old priesthood are set aside. Now only the new promises matter, the promises from the High Priest heard still today. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (JOHN 14:6). “I am the resurrection and the life” (JOHN 11:25). “I go to prepare a place for you” (JOHN 14:2). “I am with you always” (MATT. 28:20). “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (MARK 16:16; see also ACTS 2:38–39). “Baptism ... now saves you” (1 PETER 3:21). “This is my body which is given for you” (LUKE 22:19). “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (LUKE 22:20). What saves is not “yesterday’s news” but today’s reality, today’s promises and faith in those promises. This cross is yours. This empty tomb is yours. This Baptism is your entrance into the kingdom, a washing that makes you a king and priest. This bread and wine is body and blood for your forgiveness and life eternal.

Along with the radical coming of the Messiah and the new reality of His promises, there also came a reworking of the criteria for those who would be priests. First Peter 2:9 makes this clear. In the old covenant, those who served in a formal way were to come from the tribe of Levi, while the wider group — the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob/Israel — were a nation of priests by virtue of their God-given ancestry. But Israel was sadly mistaken when they looked to their bloodline as the guarantee of being at one with God in the covenant, acting as if God’s idea was to keep others out while commending them by virtue of mere lineage. Israel had forgotten that God’s promises of salvation had always been for all people. However, under the old covenant, the promises were received when those not of Israel became, in effect, honorary Israelites.<sup>28</sup> Few did so, but the door was always open. This, of course, is the very point Paul makes in Galatians 3:5–9:

Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith — just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith,

preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Revelation 1:5–6 refers to the sacrifice of the great High Priest, the “firstborn from the dead,” the one who “freed us from our sins by his blood and made us to be kings and priests to God” as the result of His sacrifice. Then, a few verses later in Revelation 5:9–10, comes this song of praise: “For you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them the kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” The promise to Abraham is fulfilled!

The royal priesthood is rooted in Christ, not in the Law, and in Him the flow is reversed, broadened out to embrace all people without qualifications. Faith in God’s promises — trust in what Christ had done for all is what saves. Nothing more. The new priesthood is universal because it is for the world. The Church is truly catholic — one saving faith for the whole of humanity. Christ has broken down the wall between Jew and Gentile and has “made us both one” (EPH. 2:14). This saving message and its washing of rebirth, renewal, and sonship is for all, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (GAL. 3:27–28).

That the door to salvation was open also to the nations and not only to Abraham’s physical descendants is a clear reminder that it was always a gift of God’s grace through faith — that is, it came as the Holy Spirit worked faith in God’s promise. Thus the emphasis on physical lineage ends in the New Testament when the High Priest shows Himself to be the open Door and the Way of salvation for all people and all nations (MATT. 28:19; JOHN 10:9; 14:6). First Peter is a catholic epistle, that is, a general letter that was written to all who believe. Addressing the “exiles dispersed abroad” (1:1),<sup>29</sup> Peter is writing to Christians whose common bond is neither geography nor ethnicity, but the new covenant promises of the new Israel. There is no need to become part of the nation of Israel (let alone members of Levi’s tribe) for this new priesthood. There is no need for circumcision, the covenant sign of Israel’s royal priesthood.<sup>30</sup> The doors are thrown open to all the nations.

<sup>29</sup> CSB 2017. ESV reads “exiles of the dispersion.”

<sup>30</sup> The sign of circumcision, while a saving sign, was easily misunderstood on at least two levels. First, it seemingly ignored females and left questions about the status of girls and women within the covenant people. Second, much as Baptism is also misunderstood (!), circumcision was often viewed as a mark of the status an individual provides (I am a true Israelite!) rather than a gracious gift from God — and is therefore at the heart of New Testament debates over the teaching of salvation

<sup>28</sup> To this point one may cite the many sojourners and aliens whose frequent mention in the Law implies not only protection under the laws of Israel, but also the possibility of inclusion within the people (see Ex. 12:48–49; NUM. 15:13–16). Specific examples of Gentile believers include, among others, Melchizedek; Jethro and his daughter, the wife of Moses; Rahab; Jael; Ruth; Uriah and Bathsheba; and the Ninevites.

## 4. The New Covenant of Holy Baptism

Thus God, and only God, makes priests and He does it from among all the nations. Yet, He does it one at a time, adding to His kingdom of priests in Holy Baptism. They have been “born again” — Baptism language for Peter — “born again to a living hope ... that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1 PETER 1:3–5). Here, in Baptism, is the door to salvation for all as Peter teaches the royal priesthood (1 PETER 3:21): “Baptism,” says Peter, “now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Baptism brings people into a salvation relationship with God — a relationship so special that even angels are astounded and long to understand (1 PETER 1:12). How so? The angels, fixed in their perfection, know Christ as Lord, but here they behold poor sinners, once condemned but now alive for Christ’s sake. Forgiven sinners know Christ as both Lord and Redeemer and only we can say, “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God ... is my Lord, who has redeemed me.”<sup>31</sup>

In teaching Baptism’s saving promise, Peter adds that the baptized person is joined to both the death of Christ as well as the new life that is ours “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him” (1 PETER 3:21B–22). All is sealed by the faith-giving Spirit — “by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven” (1 PETER 1:12) — who is present and given as promised, when water and the Word are used as Christ commands.

This is salvation entirely by grace in sharpest relief from all human merit. Baptism is the gracious work of God, done without any thought of bringing good works to the font. The baptismal covenant is forged entirely on one side — thanks be to God! That Baptism into Christ grants faith and new life in the kingdom is solely the act of God, and the believer relies purely on the mercy of God and the quickening presence of Christ’s Spirit. The same is true in the new life that follows: There is no place for works to keep the believer in faith. There is room only for repentant trust in the continuing work of the Holy Spirit, even as we confess: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified

and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”<sup>32</sup>

By the Holy Spirit the believer becomes part of the total priesthood, the royal priesthood, of Christ’s church. Being baptized “into his death” (ROM. 6:3) is to be linked to Christ’s priestly act at the point of His own sacrifice. Being buried, rising and then living in Him in Baptism, the believer is thoroughly incorporated into the body of Christ. As Christ the Head is the High Priest, every member of His body is part of the royal priesthood. Baptism is not a superficial naming — a social christening — but marks one who is new, reborn not of flesh, but the Spirit (JOHN 3:5–6; TITUS 3:5).

God makes priests in Baptism. Whether infant or adult, it is all the same, and all are priests. There is a forward-looking, future-oriented thrust in Christ’s work of Baptism. The purpose is the creation and sanctification of the whole Church. Paul points to this in Ephesians 5:26–27 when he writes, “That he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

To be baptized in Christ’s name is to have what comes with His name: a claim to His death and resurrection to life, to His right to stand before the Father. Priests bear Christ’s name and have such a right and privilege. More, in Baptism, the believer is “anointed by the Holy One” (1 JOHN 2:20). As the writer to the Hebrews says (3:1–2), “Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God’s house.” In Christ, “the high priest of our confession,” we “share in a heavenly calling” with Him to the priesthood conferred in Baptism.

## 5. The Priestly Calling of All Christians

It is crystal clear that Christians become priests not because of what they do, by would-be works of righteousness, but by faith in all its fullness with all the gifts Christ gives to those who believe. In baptismal faith Christians die to the world, to themselves and to their own works, and they live instead in Christ and for

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that is given solely by grace through faith (see ROM. 2–4; GALATIANS).

<sup>31</sup> *Luther’s Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 17. See also SC, “Creed,” 4, KW, 355.

<sup>32</sup> *Luther’s Small Catechism*, 17.

Christ. As a believer comes forth out of the waters of Baptism, priesthood comes along as well.

In chapter 3, the author of Hebrews uses a priestly title when he addresses “holy brothers” — holy “because they share in the priestly holiness of Jesus by sharing in his royal sonship,”<sup>33</sup> partaking in a “heavenly calling” with Him who is “the apostle and high priest of our confession”<sup>34</sup> (HEB. 3:1). Jesus is faithful, as was Moses, and the letter urges our own faithfulness in terms of holding fast to “our confidence,” that is, to God’s promises. Moses was faithful, declaring all that God revealed to Israel and interceding on Israel’s behalf. As such, he was both an apostle and priest.<sup>35</sup> Far more gloriously still (HEB. 3:3–4), Jesus the Son of God faithfully proclaimed the kingdom of God as the Father’s emissary (“apostle”<sup>36</sup>) and provided the necessary eternal sacrifice before returning to the Father’s right hand. To hold “fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope” (HEB. 3:6) is to have faith in the promises and priestly work of Jesus, whom we confess as Lord (see also 1 COR. 1:31; 2 COR. 10–12 and GAL. 6:14).

The call of God from heaven in Christ Jesus is to be His priests. Once more we are reminded of the threefold dimension of priesthood: sacrifice, prayer and teaching. They mark priesthood — both general and Levitical — in the Old Testament, but the New Testament priesthood portrays these responsibilities differently. Death and sacrifice — the shedding of blood — have always been close at hand and necessary for priests to carry out their work. The bulk of Old Testament references to priesthood are to the sacrifices offered in Tabernacle and Temple by Levitical priests. Prayer is assumed throughout the Old Testament as an element of priestly sacrifice, but teaching is only infrequently emphasized there. This emphasis changes, however, in the New Testament. Now, with the complete, all-sufficient, fulfilling sacrifice of the great High Priest (EPH. 5:2; HEB. 9:26; 10:12) and Passover Lamb “whose blood sets us free to be people of God”<sup>37</sup> (1 COR. 5:7), the primary work of the Levitical priesthood is finished as well. There is no reference throughout the

New Testament to any priestly office<sup>38</sup> other than the royal priesthood of the baptized. To be sure, in the New Testament, individuals are still called and authorized for the public ministry on behalf of the royal priesthood, but “priest” is never included in the various titles applied to the church’s public ministers.

Because of Adam and in Adam all within the human race die; but in Christ, the second Adam, all live (1 COR. 15:22). Sacrifice makes the difference and marks all in the royal priesthood, given that identity in Baptism because of Christ’s sacrifice. Sacrifice therefore remains prominent in the New Testament, but it is differently conceived — no blood sacrifice of slaughtered beasts or grain or wine. Now the sacrifices are the “spiritual sacrifices” of the royal priesthood (1 PETER 2:5), including the living sacrifices of their bodies (ROM. 12:1), sacrificial deeds of obedience (HEB. 13:16), sacrificial donations they offer for the support of others (PHIL. 4:18) and the sacrifice of thanks and praise found on their lips (HEB. 13:15).

The ultimate sacrifice of the Great High Priest prompts all the sacrifices of the royal priesthood. Their efforts have meaning and value because of Christ. His sacrifice lies behind the apostle Paul’s exhortation in Romans 12:1, where Christians are urged to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice on account of the mercies of God. Moreover, even as their Great High Priest is the humble Servant of Isaiah 53, so also His royal priests are called to a priestly service which will be acquainted with grief and suffering (53:3). “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have” (PHIL. 1:29–30). Suffering is indeed a mark of those who belong to the Great High Priest, the Church. The royal priesthood is His body and if one part suffers, the whole does — from the Head to the toe (1 COR. 12:26).<sup>39</sup>

Yes, martyrdom itself may be required of individual members of the royal priesthood. But as Peter speaks

<sup>33</sup> John W. Kleinig, *Hebrews* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 161.

<sup>34</sup> On confession in Hebrews, see Kleinig’s excursus in *Hebrews*, 168–70.

<sup>35</sup> It has been noted that Moses, not Aaron, is here mentioned as a priestly precursor to our Lord, a reminder of the general or royal priesthood in Israel.

<sup>36</sup> The term “apostle” in the New Testament indicates one with firsthand knowledge or testimony acting with the full authority of another. See Kleinig, *Hebrews*, 161–62.

<sup>37</sup> *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 155.

<sup>38</sup> Some may cite, however, the possible exception of Romans 15:15–16. There Paul refers to his “priestly service of the gospel of God” to the Gentiles. CSB translates: “serving as a priest of God’s good news.” Paul says this in the context of his apostolic ministry. However, while the apostles — serving in an Office of the Public Ministry — do have a particular responsibility for public proclamation as eyewitnesses, their call to proclaim the Gospel is shared not only with everyone in the public office, but also with everyone in the Church as a whole since each believer is to proclaim God’s excellencies.

<sup>39</sup> In *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), Luther refers to seven marks of the church, one of which is “the sacred cross.” Luther explains that Christians suffer “in order to become like their head, Christ” and “that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God’s word” (AE 41:164–65).



of the royal priesthood's life of sacrifice, his examples of sacrifice are more mundane. It is workers submitting to bosses and other human institutions — even odious ones (1 PETER 2:13–25). It is the godly life of a woman who wins her husband by example, not words (1 PETER 3:1–6). It is a husband's gentle love for his wife (1 PETER 3:7). It is believers bound together, loving one another with tenderness and humility (1 PETER 3:8). Paul agrees. In 2 Corinthians 9:12, having commended the Corinthians for their sacrificial gifts to suffering Christians, he adds: "For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God."

Prayer and sacrifice are not to be divorced. In the Old Testament this is obvious with its predominating focus on the "liturgical" role of the Levitical priests. The Old Testament's portrayal of priestly prayer is largely within the context of the public worship of Israel. People and priests gathered in prayer as the sacrifices were offered. Hebrews 13:15 indicates that prayer and sacrifice continue their intimate connection within the New Testament. As the royal priesthood of the New Testament sacrifices, it does so in prayer, the prayer of faith. And prayer itself is a sacrifice of praise. Yet, although it is never divorced from and sometimes subsumed by the believer's whole life of sacrifice, the royal priesthood's life of prayer deserves special attention and comment. This aspect of the universal priesthood also finds its foundation only in the Great High Priest.

Our Lord's prayer in John 17 is aptly called His "high priestly prayer." Although specific priestly terms are not used, the priestly mediatorial role of Christ is emphasized. Jesus refers to His work as One sent by the Father, "the only true God" (17:3). Christ speaks of having faithfully "manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world" (17:6), having given them the Word of God (17:8). He consecrates Himself (17:19) — unlike Aaron or the Levitical priests who must be consecrated by another (Ex. 28, 40) — and does so that He might in turn sanctify His own (17:17, 19). His intercessory prayer for His people to be sanctified — a holy people — is part and parcel of their identity as a royal priesthood. His prayer recalls the attribution of the royal priesthood as a "holy nation" in both Exodus 19 and 1 Peter 2.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> The English verbs "sanctify" and "consecrate," as well as the compound verb "make holy," are all used to render the same Greek verb (ἀγιάζω). Many such references utilizing holiness terminology, including those in this paragraph, reflect the language of priesthood in the Old Testament (e.g., Ex. 19, 28; DEUT. 7:6).

Through the High Priest, the royal priests are sanctified, set apart, as God's own possession, His holy people, His adopted sons and daughters. They, in turn are called to a life of prayer themselves. Our High Priest, Jesus, who prays for us, also invites us to join in prayer in the "Our Father" or Lord's Prayer (LUKE 11:2–4; MATT. 6:9–13). As the Commission on Theology and Church Relations states:

Therefore it is only "by the blood of Jesus," by "the new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body," that we are privileged and invited to "draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (HEB. 10:19–22). Only by virtue of our adoption as God's children through our baptism into Christ's death and Resurrection are we enabled to cry out "Abba, Father!" (ROM. 8:15). *Only through the reconciling work of our high priest, Jesus, the Son of God, can we "approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need"* (HEB. 4:16).<sup>41</sup>

The royal priesthood therefore includes the mediatorial work of constant prayer (1 THESS. 5:17; 1 TIM. 2:1–5) for all people and in all circumstances (IS. 55:6; MATT. 5:44; LUKE 6:28; PHIL. 4:6). The priesthood prays in obedience to God's command and in confident response to His promises to hear us.<sup>42</sup> It prays, in particular, that God's name would be hallowed and many would come to faith (1st and 2nd petitions; LUKE 10:2; ACTS 2:39; COL. 4:2–4). And, as royal priests pray for others to believe, they share with them the promises that faith holds to in confidence. This is not only the prayer of the royal priesthood, but also of the Great High Priest: "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (JOHN 17:20–21).

Even as the Great High Priest prays both alone and with His disciples, so also the priestly life of prayer is both corporate and individual. The Acts of the Apostles reveals this as disciples pray together awaiting the "promise from on high" (1:14). The first followers together with Pentecost's 3,000 newly baptized priests devote

<sup>41</sup> LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), *Theology and Practice of Prayer: A Lutheran View* (2011), 14. Available at <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcms&id=1745>. Emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> See Luther on the Second Commandment, SC and LC. See also the LC introduction to the Lord's Prayer, KW, 441–43.

themselves to prayer (2:42). John and Peter, as well as Paul, participate in the Temple prayer (3:1; 22:17). Royal priests pray in prison (4:31; 16:25). The apostolic ministers are marked by particular prayer responsibilities and pray as they appoint others for designated service (6:4, 6; 14:23). There is prayer for the Spirit's bestowal on the Samaritans (8:15). Saul prays (9:11); Peter prays (9:40; 10:9); Cornelius prays (10:1-4). The church engages in its priestly work of prayer in crisis, as normal practice, and to further the mission (12:5, 12; 13:3). Missionaries pray with the newly baptized (16:13-16), when they leave to serve elsewhere (20:36; 21:5-6), and for the sick (28:8).

This cursory look at priestly prayer shows that it is not limited to formal, liturgical settings, as important as the prayers of public worship are. It also indicates that the royal priesthood's life of prayer must be coupled with the New Testament concept of sacrifice as part of a kind of worship broadly understood. Priestly identity is formed and seen in formal worship, to be sure, but that hardly exhausts "service" or "worship" in a larger sense. Words from the Greek Old Testament that tend to imply only formal worship — e.g., "*leitourgein*" and its derivatives, the source of our word "liturgy," and "*latreia*" and its derivatives — have a broader meaning in the New Testament.<sup>43</sup> Worship or service, in both a narrow and broad sense, marks royal priests. The *leitourgein* word group occurs in the context of public worship in Luke 1:23 and Hebrews 9:21, but more frequently as service in a wider sense: the service of governing authorities (Rom. 13:6), the faith of the Philippians (2:17), charity for saints in need (2 Cor. 9:12). None of these three worthy activities is an official priestly function. In Romans 12:1 St. Paul uses *latreia* as he exhorts royal priests to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. The thought here is of Christians offering up the whole of their lives, not someone else making sacrifice in their behalf.

St. John has this same worship or service (*latreuein*) in mind in Revelation 7:15. He writes, "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence." The worship and service of the royal priesthood are marked by an eschatological sense — by great hope. That day will come soon, but in the meantime there is a workmanlike service to be carried out by the royal priesthood. Those priests serve

Christ by serving others.

While they wait for all promises to be fulfilled, priests are marked in yet another way: They are moved by the Spirit to witness and to take up the mission of the Church. They rejoice not in anything they might bring to Christ, but rather in passing on what they first received from Him — the promises of God made plain in Baptism, in the words spoken, and in the word tied to bread and wine, to body and blood. By participating in all those things the priests, the believers, "show forth the excellencies of God." But what are God's "excellencies"? The Greek term, *arete*, is used infrequently in the New Testament. It may be defined in English as "uncommon character worthy of praise, *excellence of character, exceptional civic virtue*" or as a "manifestation of divine power, *miracle*."<sup>44</sup> The term describes both virtuous people and God.<sup>45</sup> Here it describes God's goodness — His excellence and worthiness of praise. Praise is His due! Peter later couples the singular of *arete*, excellence, with glory (2 Peter 1:3). Curtis Giese explains: "In 2 Peter 1:3 they both [glory and excellence] refer to Christ's saving, sacrificial acts, whose benefits the Gospel brings to people."<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> BDAG s.v. ἀρετή. Its plural is translated as "excellencies" by the ESV in 1 Peter 2:9, but elsewhere as "praises" (KJV, NIV, CSB), "goodness" (NLT), or "virtues." Luther's German Bible rendered it *Tugenden*, "virtues" or "good deeds."

<sup>45</sup> An example of *arete* used for human virtue is in Philippians 4:8.

<sup>46</sup> Curtis P. Giese, *2 Peter and Jude* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 48. Rather than "glory and excellence" (ESV), the NIV and CSB translate the phrase in 2 Peter as "glory and goodness." Second Peter 1:5 uses the term to refer to the virtue or goodness that Christians are to add to their faith. Giese's view that excellence in 2 Peter refers to Christ's saving acts — articulated in the Gospel — seems to apply perfectly with its plural usage in 1 Peter 2:9. This is corroborated in the Greek Old Testament translation of Isaiah, where glory and excellence (praise [*arete*]) are also paralleled in 42:8, 12:

8 I am the LORD; that is my name; my *glory* I give to no other, nor my *praise* to carved idols.

9 Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.

10 Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants.

11 Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits; let the habitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the top of the mountains.

12 Let them give *glory* to the LORD, and declare his *praise* in the coastlands. (Emphasis added.)

Verse 12 from the LXX is also instructive because the clause "*declare his praise* in the coastlands" couples a root of the Greek verb *angello* with the noun *arete*. Peter utilizes this same combination in 1 Peter 2:9. Then, in Isaiah 43, the Lord calls Israel "the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise" (v. 21). This chapter contains an important declaration of the Lord (vv. 11-21), in which He reminds Israel that He alone is Savior (v. 11), Israel's rescuer from Egypt (vv. 14-17). They are His witnesses and therefore λαόν μου ὃν περιποιήσάμην τὰς ἀρετὰς δηγγεῖσθαι, "the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise" (v. 21).

<sup>43</sup> The New Testament uses *leitourgein* and derivatives in the context of formal worship (e.g., Luke 1:23) and for service to those in need (e.g., 2 Cor. 9:12). *Latreia* and derivatives are used in a similar narrow and broad way (e.g., Luke 2:37 and Rom. 1:9; 12:1).

It is this third element of priestly mediatorial work, declaring Christ's saving acts in the Gospel, that is given particular focus in 1 Peter 2:9–10.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Note well: God makes those who were “not a people”<sup>47</sup> into His people — His royal priesthood, His chosen race, His holy nation, His possession — for this: to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The believer made alive becomes a witness to the change God has made and to the hope that lives in the believer's heart, the hope that is meant for all. Good words that say this — God's “excellencies” and especially the Gospel message — come from the believer's lips. It can't be helped. It is as natural as breathing, as life itself. Just as the Christian must pray,<sup>48</sup> so the Christian must also praise God's grace and mercy. To say that the believer does not speak — or worse, should not speak “the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light” (NIV, NKJV) — is a denial of one's identity as a priest and a rejection of Christ's work for the world.

The priests of 1 Peter 2:9 serve by proclaiming the Gospel. Proclamation — to make known the marvelous works and gracious words of God — is the mission of the Church, the mission of all priests, of all believers. Every believer is called to confess “before men” the faith we hold in Christ Jesus (MATT. 10:32–33). As Lewis Spitz put it, Peter's exhortation in verse 9 is straightforward: “In other words, believers as priests must also be missionaries. What else could these words mean: ‘That ye should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light’ [KJV]?”<sup>49</sup> The “royal priesthood” or “the believers” are simply appellatives of the Church in the New Testament and, for that reason,

the Church's mission is not a work set aside to be carried out by a few, consigned only to some or left only to “the professionals.”<sup>50</sup> The New Testament emphasis would not be one of priest distinct from people. All believers were the royal priesthood. All the baptized would render service as God placed them in life's circumstances. Mission would be, and it is, the work of all — universal service, a universal priesthood of all baptized, of all believers.

The word mission deserves our attention. The Latin “*mitto*” and “*mittere*” at the root of “mission” means to send.<sup>51</sup> But who sends whom? Why? Where are they sent? To whom are they sent?

First, *who* sends *whom*? The sending that matters, of course, is God's. He sends His Son (JOHN 3:16–17). Father and Son send the Spirit (JOHN 14:26). The one Triune God sends the disciples into the world (JOHN 20:21–23). *Why* and *where* does God send in each of these cases — and *to whom*? This is where we have come to use the word mission as a handy term that indicates for what purpose someone is sent. So the Son's mission: He is sent to the world to redeem it. The Spirit's mission: He is sent to the Church to teach and bring to remembrance all that God has done in Christ Jesus. The disciples' mission: they are sent to humanity (“anyone”) to speak God's Law and Gospel — His retaining and forgiving of sins.

The focus of the mission of the Church — the royal priesthood — is clear and distinct. It is to declare the excellencies of God to the world — that is, to make the Gospel known and thereby make disciples (MATT. 28:19), going forth to make Christ known even to the “uttermost parts of the earth” (ACTS 1:8 KJV). Indeed, members of the royal priesthood were “sent” to Samaria and Antioch when they were scattered by persecution, and there they proclaimed the Gospel (ACTS 8:1–4; 11:19–21). But we should add that the sending is not always to a distant

<sup>47</sup> Those “not a people” echoes Hosea 1:8–9, where the prophet is told to name his second son by Gomer Lo-Ammi “not my people.” This somber note of judgment is followed by the prophetic promise of a time to follow, when Israelites will be countless under a single ruler (1:10–11). That, too, is here fulfilled as the Lord calls a new chosen race, royal priesthood, holy possession, and people for His own.

<sup>48</sup> Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14–16*, AE 24:89.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis Spitz, “The Universal Priesthood of Believers,” in *The Abiding Word: An Anthology of Doctrinal Essays for the Year 1945*, ed. Theodore Laetsch, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1946), 339.

<sup>50</sup> Although the New Testament uses several terms to refer to ministry, it seems to favor *diakonia* rather than *leitourgein*, a term with more sacerdotal overtones (although we should not see the word choice as anti-sacerdotal). The LXX regularly used forms of *leitourgein* when talking of ministry as service, so New Testament writers certainly would have been familiar with the vocabulary used in that way. Why then lean instead to *diakonia*? Perhaps because the New Testament's inspired writers wanted to emphasize the service of God's entire people as a holy nation and royal priesthood — something that had received minimal attention compared to the formal work of the Levitical priesthood in the Old Testament.

<sup>51</sup> It should be mentioned that there is no exact Hebrew or Greek equivalent term for “mission” and that the word seldom appears in English translations. The verb form, “to send,” is used frequently in both Old Testament and New Testament (two Greek verbs, *apostello* [ἀποστέλλω] and *pempo* [πέμπω]). Most importantly, *apostello* is the root of the noun “apostle,” with its sense of one sent with the full authority of the sender.



land. Anna was sent to the temple each day. When she witnessed the Christ child, blessed by Simeon, she immediately began “to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (LUKE 2:38).

If mission does not always imply sending far away, neither does it mean we are sent only to unbelievers, as important as that is. Holding up the “excellencies” is important first for others within the priesthood (ROM. 1:5–6). They — and we — need to hear the story of God’s work and His promises again and again, lest the unholy trio of the devil, world and flesh gang up and strangle the hope with which they cling to the cross and look forward in eager anticipation to the Lord’s return. So the royal priesthood proclaims God’s excellencies in weekly liturgy, daily devotions, Bible studies with fellow church members and casual conversations with a brother or sister in Christ. This dare not be discounted. Our vocation — that is, our calling from God — is to specific people and places: family, work, society, congregation. In a wonderful paradox, God *sends* (*missio*) us first to the people and places where He has *called* (*vocatio*) us. Fathers are to bring up their children, teaching them the Word (EPH. 6:4). In fact, in the context of 1 Peter 2:9–10, Peter gives detailed examples of some ways the royal priesthood carries out its proclamation in personal vocations. Citizens submit to authorities (2:13–17), employees to their employers (2:18–24), wives to their husbands (3:1–6), and husbands care for their wives (3:7). These activities of the royal priests include both words *and* behavior.

Then what about “the uttermost parts” of the earth? We might think of the other side of the globe or a remote mission field in a far-flung place. Such places are, of course, included, but “the end of the earth” for Jewish believers living in Palestine at the time of Jesus was likely envisioned differently. Their mindset was like the one *The New Yorker* once spoofed on a cover cartoon.<sup>52</sup> A street grid of Manhattan was drawn in some detail, but across the Hudson River to the west was a square about the size of a city block containing New Jersey, Texas, Chicago, Kansas City, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas within it. *The New Yorker*’s world revolved around central Manhattan’s few square miles. No other place really counted. Harlem, the Bowery, or an “outer borough”? That’s not Manhattan. New Jersey? It’s not Manhattan. Those other places? None of them is Manhattan, and that’s all that matters. There was a similar mindset for the first century

Jew, who did not have to go to the pillars of Hercules at Gibraltar or even beyond to see the world. The first challenge was simply to take one step beyond wherever there was safety and familiarity. In Acts 1:8, as Jesus sends the disciples, He starts with Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria — all that before “the end of the earth.”<sup>53</sup>

That is the geography of Acts. The apostolic witness is delivered to Jerusalem — to the strangers that fill the city, to a lame man, to those who hear and those who are hostile (Acts 2–7). Then, as the Church is scattered, individuals from the royal priesthood *who are not apostles* carry the message to Judea, to Samaria and to Damascus where Saul is baptized (Acts 8–9). Along the way, Luke tells us of a miraculous sending of Philip into the wilderness where he meets, teaches and baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). In Acts 10, he relates how Peter is sent to Caesarea on the coast, to the home of the Gentile Cornelius, who believed the message Peter brought. With these events, it is clear that the Church has gone to the nations — that the royal priesthood will be for Jew and Gentile alike. And, by the end of the book, Paul is in Rome, sent under less than enviable circumstances, but proclaiming the Gospel just the same (Acts 28). In this history of the earliest Church, we see the fulfillment of Christ’s promise at His ascension that His followers would come from all the world — just how His kingdom would expand. That promise is the last promise that needed to be fulfilled before Christ comes again on the last day. But success in Acts hardly puts an end to mission. Rather it means we are on borrowed time or, better, on God-granted time to spread the Word. And as long as there are believers, that is, as long as there are members of the royal priesthood, there will be service that is needed and there will be people to serve. While Christ’s charge to His followers at His ascension was His last promise (now fulfilled) with no more to come until He comes again, and while we ought to expect His return any and every day (1 THESS. 5:1–5), that is no reason to cease work. It is instead all the more reason to redouble efforts in missions, not knowing how much time remains. *Tempus fugit!*

It should be plain, then, that the mission of the Church — the royal priesthood, the baptized — does begin at home, but it does not end there with family and fellow church members. Royal priests are royal servants. Royals reign — a royal priesthood — and from that

<sup>52</sup> The title was “View of the World from 9th Avenue,” by Saul Seiberg. It appeared on the front cover of the March 29, 1976, issue. Electronic reproductions are readily available by internet search.

<sup>53</sup> We note that the idea that mission should primarily entail going to other lands did not become prominent until the time of the missionary movement in the nineteenth century. See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 341.

reigning position, enslaved to no one, the priest is free to serve selflessly and purely as a living sacrifice, focusing on a realm that is as wide as the kingdom of God. The royal priesthood extends the work Christ came to do, continuing to speak freedom to captives (LUKE 4:18). This word of freedom is the word of the One who has conquered sin and death and the devil for the world.

Even as every believer has received the blessings of Christ's death and resurrection along with the Spirit promised, so every believer is given the task or *opportunity* to make the same known in the world. This does not mean, however, that every member of the royal priesthood offers identical types of priestly service. While all, in various ways, proclaim the excellencies of God's saving grace in Christ Jesus, this does not mean everyone is a pastor or minister or teacher of the church. (This also recognizes that not every royal priest is equally adept at telling others of Christ Jesus.) Thus, the Holy Scriptures teach not only the general priesthood of all believers, but also the particular public office of the ministry. "Not many of you should be teachers" (JAMES 3:1). Thus, there are different gifts given by the Spirit to the Church and different ways of serving are exercised, but all serve the "common good" and the one mission making known the saving name and works of the Lord (1 COR. 12).

All the implementation of all the gifts of believers is toward the central work or mission of the Church: the proclamation of the Gospel. The Church exists only where there is this mission, and the Church expands only where there is this mission. Formation means Gospel proclamation — the word in which the Spirit works to create, build and sustain Christ's Church. Mission is not extracurricular. It is basic and essential to the life of the church, and all believers are inextricably bound to this mission. It is impossible to be a believer, that is, to be in the royal priesthood, and not to be involved in this mission. All the members of the royal priesthood are gifted *by the Holy Spirit* and the Spirit's work alone underlies and enables the confession that marks the Church: "Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 COR. 12:3-4). He empowers individual believers as He apportions His gifts, and always to enable the confession that unites the royal priesthood as one, holy, catholic and apostolic people, the Church.

While there certainly is continuity with the Old Testament, and while ideas about priesthood and service are carried over to the New Testament in some respects, it is clear that the New Testament also has transformed priesthood and service. We have heard this transformation described in the epistles and have seen it carried out in the Book of Acts. As the story stretched beyond the New Testament texts, the Church's task now was to continue in this line, to carry forth this transformation into the wider non-Jewish world and culture (although witnessing to the Jews remained an important task). The task was to be faithful to the message, while also translating the message for people in circumstances never before imagined. The more those second-last days stretched out, the more it fell to the Church to keep an eye on this idea of the royal priesthood lest it lose the identity and mission. Efforts were made, but in the long run, the focus shifted.

### III. PRIESTHOOD IN THE EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHURCH

*“Are not even we laics [laity] priests?” — Tertullian*

**T**HE BLESSINGS AND THE PRIVILEGE of the relationship enjoyed by those who are priests in God’s royal priesthood carried over into the early church.<sup>54</sup> While the nomenclature and structure of the public ministry were still developing, those Christians whom we would call “the laity” were taking an active role in the life of the body of Christ.<sup>55</sup> The whole assembly of believers both pursued their own responsibilities and tasks as a royal priesthood and also approved designated individuals from their midst to serve them in public ministry.<sup>56</sup>

*Clement*, a first-century bishop of Rome (from A.D. 88–99), urged believers in Corinth “[L]et each of you, brothers, give thanks to God with your own group, maintaining a good conscience, not overstepping the designated rule of his ministry, but acting with reverence.”<sup>57</sup> While we do not know exactly what Clement meant by the phrase “with his own group” (the Greek is *tagma*), clearly those on the receiving end of Clement’s letter would have understood what he had in mind, with particular duties or tasks that were expected of

them, and these were not likely to be insignificant. We do know that the laity in the early church baptized, received deathbed confessions and sometimes preached. For example, while Origen (late 2nd, early 3rd century) was still a catechist, he preached at Caesarea, an activity supported by Alexander of Jerusalem, who noted that bishops elsewhere in Asia Minor had permitted other laymen to do the same.<sup>58</sup>

The point here simply is that Clement and the Christian community understood that all involved — the people and those in the public office — had particular roles to play, and all should both respect the responsibilities of others and carry out their own tasks.<sup>59</sup> Those involved in the local Christian community provided for overseers and deacons to minister in their midst, identifying those with particular gifts and talents who were suited for the task. In chapters 42, 44 and 48 *1 Clement* writes about the church in Corinth, identifying and providing for those who would minister to them in the public office, using their abilities for the upbuilding of all. The apostle Paul had left Clement plenty of guidance in his pastoral epistles. So he could exhort both the people and those in public service within the Christian community to respect the work carried out by all concerned from all quarters.

<sup>54</sup> In this section we are summarizing the work of Cyril Eastwood, *The Royal Priesthood of the Faithful: An Investigation of the Doctrine from Biblical Times to the Reformation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963).

<sup>55</sup> The term “priest” is applied to Christ for the most part in the Early Church Fathers (ante-Nicene), and then also to the laity, but it also comes to be applied to those who serve in public ministry — first to bishops and later to presbyters. See “Priesthood,” in Everett Ferguson, ed. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland, 1990). The English word is apparently derived from the Greek word *presbyter* by way of Latin and then German.

<sup>56</sup> *1 Clement* 44:3. See Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 105.

<sup>57</sup> *1 Clement* 41:1, in Holmes, 99.

<sup>58</sup> Eastwood, 56.

<sup>59</sup> In chapter 40 of *1 Clement*, the importance of good order is emphasized: “Those, therefore, who make their offerings at the appointed times are acceptable and blessed, for those who follow the instructions of the Master cannot go wrong. For to the high priest the proper services have been given, and to the priests the proper office has been assigned, and upon the Levites the proper ministries have been imposed. The layman is bound by the layman’s rules” (*1 Clement* 40:3–5, in Holmes, 99). Though it is not certain, the reference to “the layman” in this context appears to parallel “the Levites” in the preceding sentence.



Laity should honor those serving in the public office that had been entrusted to them, and those in the office should allow the laity truly to be the body of Christ.

Polycarp, a second-century bishop, demonstrated in his epistle to the Philippians exactly the kind of spirit a Christian was to have.<sup>60</sup> Although in a position of authority, he replied in a generous tone to their request for advice: “I am writing these comments about righteousness, brothers, not on my own initiative, but because you invited me to do so.”<sup>61</sup> While Polycarp had a particular role to play, his use of the term brothers is striking, as he saw people actively involved in the life of the congregation. So, for example, when there was a problem with a presbyter, Polycarp called on the people to “be reasonable in this matter, and do not regard such people enemies, but, as sick and straying members, restore them, in order that you may save your body in its entirety.”<sup>62</sup> Widows were not marginalized, but as “God’s altar,” they offered prayers for those in the community.<sup>63</sup> In general, Polycarp underscored the idea of sacrifice in response to the identity that the believers have as members of the royal priesthood of Christ.

Another second-century theologian, Justin Martyr, emphasized the corporate action of the community in the Eucharist, as the people together offered prayers, and when finished, then brought bread, wine and water for the celebration of the sacrament.<sup>64</sup> While Justin speaks of the public ministry — the one who presides at the celebration — he also refers to those present as “the true high priestly race of God.”<sup>65</sup> And following the sacrifice of thanksgiving as the sacrament is received, there came also a sacrifice of service offered by this high priestly people, as they cared for the sick, the orphaned, the widows, those imprisoned and those in need of protection, as they found them in their midst and in their community.<sup>66</sup>

This priestly service happens not in order to become someone or something special, but because the Christians already have a special identity. Justin notes that just as in the Old Testament those who were descendants of Jacob, also called Israel, took on his name, so those who

are from Christ bear His name and are called children of God.<sup>67</sup> In that connection and because of this relationship, Justin calls on Christians to carry out a special mission: “by God’s will He became man, and gave to us this teaching for the conversion and for the restoration of mankind.”<sup>68</sup> And what has happened? Justin writes, “For from Jerusalem there went out into the world, men, twelve in number, and these illiterate, of no ability in speaking; but by the power of God they proclaimed to every race of men that they were sent by Christ to teach to all the word of God; and we who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ.”<sup>69</sup> Justin himself was a prime example of this, but so were countless others who offered not only their words but even their very lives as a kind of sacrifice in their priestly calling. The point here again is that Christian believers were active in their witness, and in their service, as those with a special identity.

Still in the second century, Irenaeus saw the Church having a priestly nature because of the priestly character of all those who made up the Church.<sup>70</sup> When the disciples of Jesus were accused of working on the Sabbath after they plucked and ate grain while walking through the field, Jesus pointed to what David did in the Old Testament, when he ate the bread of the Presence, commenting that such eating would not have been lawful except for priests. That meant that David was in effect a priest in the eyes of God. As Irenaeus wrote, “For all the righteous possess the sacerdotal rank.”<sup>71</sup> The Church has a priestly character because God has made it so, giving spiritual gifts to be used in service. And the ultimate service are those efforts made for the salvation of all.

Mathetes, another early teacher, drew this analogy: Christians are in the world rather like the soul is in the body. It is there to enliven it and sustain it. “God has assigned them this illustrious position, which it were unlawful of them to forsake.”<sup>72</sup> That is, there is no avoiding the ministry and mission of the priesthood to make salvation known. Put another way, witness or mission is not the work simply of those in the public office. It is

<sup>60</sup> See Eastwood, 59–61.

<sup>61</sup> *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* 3:1, in Holmes, 283.

<sup>62</sup> *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* 11:4, in Holmes, 293, 295

<sup>63</sup> *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* 4:3, in Holmes, 285.

<sup>64</sup> See Eastwood, 61–66.

<sup>65</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho* 116 (ANF 1:257).

<sup>66</sup> *The First Apology of Justin* 67 (ANF 1:186).

<sup>67</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho* 123 (ANF 1:261).

<sup>68</sup> *The First Apology of Justin* 23 (ANF 1:170–71).

<sup>69</sup> *The First Apology of Justin* 39 (ANF 1:175–76).

<sup>70</sup> See Eastwood, 66–70.

<sup>71</sup> *Irenaeus against Heresies* 4.8.3 (ANF 1:471).

<sup>72</sup> *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus* 6[ 5] (ANF 1:27).

the work of all in the body, all who are part of the royal priesthood. At least that is how Irenaeus, Mathetes and the early church understood it. Irenaeus is known for his strong support of the episcopal leadership in the church, but he also thought highly of the wider number of Christians, of those led and served. As he wrote, “It is not possible to name the number of the gifts which the Church, scattered throughout the world, has received from God.”<sup>73</sup>

While Tertullian understood that there are those certainly who serve publicly, he saw all people, touched by the Holy Spirit, as priests offering spiritual sacrifices to God. He referred to all Christians when he said, “We are the true adorers and the true priests praying in the spirit, sacrifice ... which assuredly He has required, which He has looked forward to for Himself.”<sup>74</sup> For Tertullian, the Church is composed of spiritual people offering a spiritual sacrifice of prayer and exercising a spiritual priesthood, living in a discipline that applies to all priests, that is, to all believers. So, for example, Tertullian expects that the same high standards that were applied to those in the public ministry when it came to marriage, held also for all Christians. He asks rhetorically, “Are not even we laics [laity] priests?”<sup>75</sup> The Church does not equal clergy for Tertullian, but rather consists of all believers. And while they certainly want the public office to be filled, Tertullian allows that “where there is no joint session of the ecclesiastical Order, you offer, and baptize and are priest, alone for yourself.”<sup>76</sup> We should not see this as an invitation to “every man for himself.” Rather it sets the bar high in expecting much of believers. “Therefore if you have the rights of a priest in your own person in cases of necessity, it behooves you to have likewise the discipline of a priest, whenever it may be necessary to have the right of a priest.”<sup>77</sup>

Tertullian expects much from the laity.<sup>78</sup> In fact, it was his dislike for the growing division between laity and clergy that pushed him finally in the direction of Montanism with its ultra-strict morality. And, while Tertullian would eventually be condemned by the church, that condemnation was not because of his emphasis on the priesthood of the laity or his warnings about clergy

who acted as if their office made them superior to the laity. Eastwood notes that those who followed the lead of Montanus were not initially forced out of the church for false teaching. They walked away on their own and were subsequently condemned as heretics after they separated themselves from the church.<sup>79</sup> Tertullian, as noted above, rightly taught that laymen, like clergy, were subject to Christ’s words about divorce and remarriage (MATT. 5:31–32; 19:3–9 and parallels) because laymen were also priests — “Are not even we laics priests?” — and thus also referred to the validity of Baptism performed by a layman.<sup>80</sup> Tertullian was not alone in the patristic era seeking the high road for believers. That was simply expected of those who were marked by the spiritual priesthood described in the New Testament.

Similar to Tertullian, Origen, another early author whose false teachings were eventually condemned, referred to the royal priesthood — a teaching that was never condemned. He states matter-of-factly: “For all who have been anointed with the unction of the sacred chrism have been made priests.”<sup>81</sup>

Eastwood points out that none of the early church fathers mentioned here dealt with the spiritual or universal priesthood extensively or exhaustively. Instead, they commented on the concept as they encountered particular issues or problems. Because they can deal with the concept in such a matter-of-fact way without first needing to lay out a wider theoretical basis suggests that the universal or spiritual priesthood of all believers was not an obscure teaching, but rather was widely accepted and understood by those who read their various texts. They understood that the whole Church was a priestly people and, while there were those who presided publicly in worship, all offered a spiritual sacrifice on account of their spiritual identity and their relationship with Christ. It seems that the priesthood of the baptized was no foreign notion, but rather was understood and carried over from the ideas laid out in the New Testament.<sup>82</sup> Other issues dominated the life and thought of the early church and its theologians: the Trinity, for example, or the person and work of Christ. That the priesthood of Christian believers does not demand the same attention suggests that it was generally understood and embraced.

<sup>73</sup> *Irenaeus against Heresies* 2.32.4 (ANF 1:409).

<sup>74</sup> *On Prayer* 28 (ANF 3:690).

<sup>75</sup> *An Exhortation to Chastity* 7 (ANF 4:54). See Eastwood, 75.

<sup>76</sup> *An Exhortation to Chastity* 7 (ANF 4:54).

<sup>77</sup> *An Exhortation to Chastity* 7 (ANF 4:54).

<sup>78</sup> See Eastwood, 73–75.

<sup>79</sup> Eastwood, 75.

<sup>80</sup> *An Exhortation to Chastity* 7 (ANF 4:54).

<sup>81</sup> *Homilies on Leviticus* 9:9 as quoted in Eastwood, 77. See his comments on Origen, 76–80.

<sup>82</sup> Eastwood, 80.

The door to change was opened in the third century by Cyprian (ca. A.D. 200–258), who, because of the circumstances in which he lived and worked, came to emphasize the importance of priests in the public office and to cast what they did in a slightly different light. Eastwood summarizes Cyprian's view: "He conceived that the bishops were a *special* priesthood and had a *special sacrifice to offer*. So the High Priestly Race gave place to a High Priestly Class, and the spiritual sacrifices gave place to an actual sacrifice offered to God in the Eucharist."<sup>83</sup> The earliest Christians were largely Jews, and it was natural that they should understand priesthood and sacrifice against the background first of the Old Testament, and then the New Testament image of Christ along with the material from the New Testament texts. As Gentiles now came to the faith in increasing numbers, they did not share those same background assumptions, but often saw things in a different light. They were also familiar with Greek temple worship and its priests. The sacrifice for sins by Christ, the great High Priest who offered Himself, was difficult to grasp. And to say that all believers were priests spiritually could be somewhat confusing. If sacrifices are spiritual, it might seem that there are no real priests — that Christianity is a priestless faith.

In contrast, the religious practices and political hierarchy of the empire and its cities were familiar to the new converts. The chief cities had temples and priests and Rome had a well-structured political order. Consequently, as Eastwood notes, over time "imperial rule became the pattern upon which ecclesiastical supervision was based."<sup>84</sup> As a result, the church came to insist not only on particular teachings — orthodoxy — but also on particular practices and enforced both teaching and practice with equal vigor. A violation of unity in *practice* resulted in excommunication as quickly as did a violation of orthodox doctrine.<sup>85</sup>

Cyprian was part of this. He insisted on a pattern of unity that includes both doctrine and practice, seeing its guarantee in the office of the bishop. Speaking for the church, he could simply say that we do have those in authority — bishops as well as other clergy — who are a kind of special priesthood. This is not the royal priesthood of all the baptized. Cyprian's priests have a special sacrifice to offer: not simply the sacrifice of prayer or worship or Christian life, but the sacrifice

of the Eucharist. Putting the best intention on this, Cyprian hoped to answer questions. Yet we see here a new understanding and emphasis on both "priest" and "sacrifice." Cyprian opened the way in which the church would come to understand clergy as well as the universal priesthood. Ironically, even as an organization and as this distinction began to grow, the church was developing a way to meet both external and internal challenges later in the Middle Ages. The groundwork laid here and the distinction that emerged would be both a plus and a minus for the church. As the church grew, it could maintain continuity and consistency only by selecting a small number of leaders and investing them with significant authority.

Church leadership had been important from early on as the apostolic fathers and their successors handed down the message of Christ and the apostles, even as the New Testament texts were being written and then collected. As time passed and as the church reached out and grew in number — a good thing! — leadership in the person of the bishops shouldered any number of tasks to maintain the church's identity and continuity. It is understandable that the bishop would be raised up and respected for the things he did. He brought people into the church in Baptism, he confirmed Baptism with a laying on of hands in confirmation, and he brought people into communion with Christ in the Supper that followed. The bishop was with the people in these important steps. But Cyprian went further and emphasized that church and office were largely indistinguishable: "[T]hey are the church who are a people united to the priest and the flock which adheres to its pastor. Whence you ought to know that the bishop is in the church and the church is in the bishop."<sup>86</sup> So what is done by those in the public office and what is offered is now marked also by a definite note of authority. (Constantine's later fourth-century involvement would serve to underscore this approach in which efforts to be both identified by and led by theology were bolstered also by organization or practice.)

To be sure, those in the public office, especially bishops, were important for guiding the faith and teaching the saving truth, and bishops served as a useful network for a far-flung church. Yet the bishops also failed to fully unify the church. As Werner Elert says after tracing the

<sup>83</sup> Eastwood, 80. See his full discussion of Cyprian, 80–90.

<sup>84</sup> Eastwood, 81.

<sup>85</sup> See Eastwood, 81–82.

<sup>86</sup> Epistle 48.8 (ANF 5.374–75) (*To Florentius Pupiananus, on Calumniators*; Epistle 46 in the Oxford edition). This echoes Ignatius: "Wherever the Bishop appears, there let the multitude of the people be; just as where Christ Jesus is, there is the catholic church." However, Ignatius centers his view of the bishop on his eucharistic role, whereby Christ is present in His body. See *Letter to the Smyrneans* (ANF 1.184).



excommunications between bishops in the early church, all equally boasting of the legitimacy of their succession and office, “If the unity of the church rested on the bishops and their apostolic succession, it rested rather insecurely.”<sup>87</sup> Moreover, when Cyprian says that the Lord’s Supper is a sacrifice of the Lord, and that the power to offer this rests in the bishop who sacrifices the Lord’s passion, the door is open for a change in the way those in the public office are perceived — now not simply a distinction but the start of an elevation. The growing consensus that priesthood equals clergy locates the responsibility for maintaining the unity of the church, the purity of its teaching and the consistency or regularity of its worship, all in the clerical priest who offers up the eucharistic sacrifice. It is a powerful combination, and while no one may have intended to overshadow the idea of the universal priesthood, the fact is that a new tone was struck and a new direction was set. The complementarity of the service of the public office with the service offered by all in the royal priesthood would become skewed over time.

Even as Cyprian set the direction that Christianity would follow for the most part on the matter of priesthood, another church father revisited key New Testament themes, leaving ideas that would be revived long after him. Augustine (A.D. 354–430)<sup>88</sup> cast important light on what happens in Christian Baptism. Three blessings are given: forgiveness of sins, membership in the body of Christ, and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Augustine knew, of course, that Baptism did not instantly produce mature Christians. But Baptism’s blessings were real. Here is real forgiveness as one is delivered from the power of sin. Here is real membership in the Body, as one finds a place to grow and develop, to resist sin and gain spiritual strength. Here the Spirit grants us a place to grow and develop. Although the Christian is baptized only once, the sign and substance of Baptism remain as a reminder of the grace given all life long. No wonder, as Augustine recounted in his *Confessions*, that he wished he had been baptized sooner.<sup>89</sup> (Augustine describes how his mother had followed the common but unfortunate practice of delaying Baptism lest sins then committed should ruin its effect — a premise and practice that he rejects.)

Augustine tied the priesthood of believers to the high priesthood of Christ, declaring with the psalmist that he longed for the most menial service among the people of God because it is *Christ’s* priesthood, the One who is “the mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” This is the people whom the apostle Peter calls ‘a holy people, a royal priesthood.’<sup>90</sup> Augustine saw that Baptism was a priestly action of Christ as well as a priestly action of the whole church,<sup>91</sup> and it was Christ’s washing that made the faithful also priests by virtue of the faith given and the place they had in the Church, the Body of Christ. Priests do not empower Baptism. Christ does: “My origin is Christ, my root is Christ, my head is Christ. ... For I believe, not in the minister by whose hands I am baptized, but in Him who justifieth the ungodly, that my faith may be counted to me as righteousness.”<sup>92</sup> The baptized child of God now enjoys a new identity with God as Father, and also has an array of brothers and sisters, all marked by the cross of Christ in Baptism. The Word proclaims that Baptism has a wide effect: It not only changes the one being washed, but as the people hear, they recognize themselves as ones still marked by the cross, people of God, His royal priesthood.

At the baptisms in Augustine’s day, confirmation also often occurred along with the giving of chrism (anointing with oil). It was done in a single ceremony and involved linked actions. Once a person had been made a member of the Body and given a place in the Church in Baptism, confirmation then validated that identity and sealed the person as one now equipped for service in the Church and its mission, as God’s Spirit would provide. The chrism was yet another sign that the person was equipped for service in Christ’s kingdom. Commenting on Revelation 20:6, Augustine wrote: “This clearly does not mean only the bishops and presbyters, who are now called by the distinctive name of ‘priests’ in the Church; but just as we call all Christians ‘Christ’s’ in virtue of their sacramental anointing (*chrisma*) so we call them all ‘priests’ because they are members of the one Priest. And the apostle Peter says of them that they are ‘a holy people, a royal priesthood.’”<sup>93</sup>

Just as ordination consecrated a person to the Office of the Public Ministry, so here those confirmed and

<sup>87</sup> Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966, 2003), 53.

<sup>88</sup> See Eastwood’s chapter on Augustine, 91–101.

<sup>89</sup> Eastwood, 92, quotes from *The Confessions of St. Augustine* 1.11.

<sup>90</sup> *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 17.5.728.

<sup>91</sup> Eastwood, 92–93.

<sup>92</sup> *In Answer to the Letters of Petilian, the Donatist* 1.7–8 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 4:522).

<sup>93</sup> *City of God* 20.10.919.

given this one-time chrism were fitted for service in various ways in the Body of Christ. The sacrifice to be made might come in the extreme: martyrdom. It would also be a life marked by humility and doxology for what Christ gives. As Augustine put it in *The City of God*:

To this God we owe our service — what in Greek is called *latría* — whether in the various sacraments or in ourselves. For we are his temple, collectively, and as individuals. ... When we lift up our hearts to him, our heart is his altar. We propitiate him by our priest, his only-begotten Son. We sacrifice blood-stained victims to him when we fight for truth ‘as far as the shedding our blood.’ We burn the sweetest incense for him, when we are in his sight on fire with devout and holy love. We vow to him and offer to him the gifts he has given us, and the gift of ourselves. ... We offer to him, on the altar of the heart, the sacrifice of humility and praise, and the flame on the altar is the burning fire of charity.<sup>94</sup>

Christians then are called to sacrifice themselves for Christian unity, living for and submitting to others in love, even as they ever strive to know God. In His praise we find delight, “for Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”<sup>95</sup> The sense of connection and the certainty found in faith also bring a sense of freedom, with the believer dependent on Christ alone and no other mediator. “Look, the days which were foretold have now arrived. There is no priest in the line of Aaron, and any man who belongs to his line sees the Christian sacrifice prevailing all over the world.”<sup>96</sup> Because the Gospel is catholic, the priesthood created by it is catholic or universal, and the message proclaimed and the teaching given are catholic — a universal message offered for people everywhere to understand.

Augustine leaves no doubt who Christians are and what they are about: priests claimed by God for service as God gives opportunity. To be sure, the body of Christ is served by those in the public office, but this is service that leads hearts, minds, and lives to action. Being in the royal priesthood is no spectator job with Christians standing by. From the time Augustine heard the words ‘*tolle lege*,’ that is, “take up and read,”<sup>97</sup> he was active —

at that moment taking up the Scriptures through which God drew him to faith, and thereafter taking up the tasks of teaching and interpreting the faith even as the world around seemed to be coming unglued and Christians sought to understand what their citizenship in a far greater city meant.

Augustine was not forgotten through the Middle Ages, but seeds that Cyprian planted would grow to provide order and authority in ways he himself probably never imagined. The introduction of indulgences — initially simply a sign of the intent to change one’s life as prescribed by the priest, but eventually a claim of forgiveness offered for sins themselves, as offered by the institutional church embodied in Rome — boosted the image and authority of clergy in the public office. It did so at the expense of the mutual consolation of the brethren, once a staple of life in the church. “See how they love one another,” Tertullian once wrote, and there is no greater love than to speak the forgiving words of the Gospel one to another. But while that was still there “on paper,” the matter of confessing and restoring and upbuilding would for all practical purposes become the responsibility of clergy alone over the centuries between the end of the early church era and the evangelical reformation.

At the beginning of the fourth century, at the time of the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), Rome had neither legal nor de facto superiority over other bishoprics and other centers of Christianity. Yet in the centuries that followed, Rome’s status grew. The move of the capital to Constantinople in the East left a hole in the Western Mediterranean, and the eventual collapse of the Roman Empire left a vacuum that the church of Rome came to fill. The institutional church now filled a double role: to evangelize and to acculturate. By the end of the early church era, while the East-West perspective through the Mediterranean basin was not ignored, friction with the church in the East prompted Rome to cast its eyes in another direction, to look north into Europe and to new people who needed to hear the message the Church had to bring — people who could be knit into a new kind of empire.

Gregory the Great (Gregory I, pope in A.D. 590–604) was a visionary leader who saw both the need and the opportunity to change the focus of western Christianity.<sup>98</sup> From Rome he sent out ordained clergy as well as monks to serve as missionaries. As they took the

<sup>94</sup> *City of God* 10.3.375.

<sup>95</sup> *Confessions of St. Augustine* 1.1 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 1.45).

<sup>96</sup> *City of God* 17.5.726.

<sup>97</sup> *Confessions of St. Augustine* 1.1 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 1:127).

<sup>98</sup> See Eastwood, 105–9.

message, they also pointed back to the Roman church as the source that had sent them, thus heightening Rome's image and boosting the prestige of the Bishop of Rome, as well as the clerics he had sent. At the same time, Gregory did not turn his back on the laity. He understood that the call to Christian witness fell to both priests and laypeople. Moreover, Gregory saw that not all clergy were alike, that some could serve well as parish priests, while others were better suited to reach out individually with the Christian message. He recognized that such a task was too big for the clergy alone, and Christian people were also enlisted to witness, not simply for pragmatic reasons, but because it was the proper thing for Christians to do. Eastwood quotes Gregory's letter to Cominicus (XLVII):

The priest's lips should teach knowledge, for he is a messenger of the Lord [by priest he is referring to an ordained cleric]; *but all may attain the same high dignity if they will.* Whoever calls his neighbor from wicked ways to a right course of life, he, too, certainly is a messenger of the Lord. Hast thou no bread to give to the needy? Thou hast a tongue. Thou has something of more value than bread. ... To the poorest even the little that he has received will be reckoned as a talent.<sup>99</sup>

The "high dignity" that Gregory names is one of being "a messenger of the Lord" — and any Christian who calls another "to a right course of life" is such. Clearly Gregory recognized that the mission of the Church fell to all Christians. While Gregory certainly supported the ordained priests, the tasks of knowing the Scriptures and of witnessing belonged also to the whole Church (the universal priesthood). That teaching of the New Testament and the early church is retained by Gregory. It is ironic that Gregory, who preserved and promoted both the ordained ministry and the spiritual calling of the laity, and who firmly rejected any title of "universal bishop" for himself as bishop of Rome,<sup>100</sup> would come to be identified by many as the father of the medieval papacy.

Even as the church continued to expand in new directions in the wake of Gregory, it also faced challenges. While the church moved into what is modern-day Europe, it shrank and all but disappeared in other lands. In large areas the church was not prepared for the type of challenge posed by the rise of Islam. Here was a focused people bent on expansion, a people who overmatched

the church, which had become lax. While the church had established centers of learning for clergy, it had failed to penetrate deeply into the lives of Christian laity, who were ill prepared to speak up for the faith. For example, from the earliest church to the time of Mohammed, there is no evidence of a vernacular translation of the Scriptures anywhere in North Africa.<sup>101</sup>

Eastwood notes that the struggle over icons dulled the idea of the universal priesthood in the East. But greater harm came with a change in the West's penitential practices.<sup>102</sup> The loss of identity among the Christian laity and the blurred focus on God's forgiving love in Christ gave space for fear and ignorance, as Christians sought certainty and stability in salvation. The church moved to fill that gap. This must not be seen as some sort of cynical or manipulative response, but rather an effort by the church's institution to meet the needs felt by the people, even if the church itself was off target in the theological and practical answers it provided.

In the early church for some six centuries, Christians who fell into grave sin were admonished and then brought back into fellowship with public confession and absolution pronounced, followed then by some public satisfaction — fasting perhaps, or giving to Christian charity. Such satisfaction was seen as a kind of promise or expression of determination to avoid sin and to lead a Christian life. It was not an effort to secure or guarantee forgiveness. As the church entered the seventh century — often thought of as the start of the Middle Ages — several changes took place. The public confession of earlier times was displaced by private confession made to a priest, and the active satisfaction that previously had been prescribed by the congregation, the body to which the penitent was being restored, was instead now determined by that priest alone.

These changes were soon accompanied by other new and insidious ideas. There arose the notion that the virtues of recognized "saints" — those individuals who were known to be important figures of the past and fine examples of Christian faith and life — were so extensive that they easily prevented the saints from having to endure any purgation after death. And, since their virtues exceeded their own needs, they were now on deposit for ordinary sinners to tap in order to lessen their own time in Purgatory. This was the "treasury of merits," a pool of goodness for a penitent to draw from and then to offer

<sup>99</sup> Eastwood, 106–7; emphasis added.

<sup>100</sup> Eastwood, 105–6.

<sup>101</sup> Eastwood, 114.

<sup>102</sup> See Eastwood, 120–27.



up as his own. Control of the treasury belonged to the papacy and, by delegation, to the ordained priest. And, as the whole practice of confession and absolution changed, contrition, feeling sorrow for one's sin, became more a matter of attrition, a matter of fear and the worry of how to navigate this complex system.

These changes gave greater emphasis and authority to the clerical priest. He became the very gatekeeper of eternal life and death. This accordingly diminished the role and responsibility of the Christian laity to engage with and to forgive a sinner, as the life of repentance was controlled exclusively by the ordained clergy and the institution of auricular confession. While forgiveness was still there for those who might listen, too often the message was one of compliance and obedience. It was hard for the institutional church to resist the power there for the taking in the practice of confession and absolution. Often supported by political authorities, the practice was not only a spiritual exercise, but it was also a useful vehicle for social control and formation.<sup>103</sup>

Changes that came in the doctrine and practice of the Lord's Supper further boosted the image of the priest in the eyes of the public and widened the gap between those ordained in the Office of the Public Ministry and those in the universal priesthood.<sup>104</sup> Out of the ninth-century exchange between Radbertus and Ratramnus over the nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament came what would develop into the idea of transubstantiation. Bread and wine were physical objects, but by the priest's action their very substance was changed. Although the point was to highlight the sacrament, the ordained priest's status also rose. The idea of mass as sacrifice, offering up what Christ has done to connect to that treasury of merits, was bound to lift up the cleric as well. As with auricular confession, here, too, he became the dispenser or the controller of that which the people felt they needed, and the sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise that came from the universal priesthood became less important. What first emerged here in this ninth-century consideration of the Lord's Supper would be reinforced in the centuries that followed.

A final development that contributed to both clerical prestige and the importance of the bishops may be identified, namely, the expansion and growth of church

structure and canon law.<sup>105</sup> Hildebrand — later to become Pope Gregory VII — did much in the eleventh century to regularize church administration as well as church law, strongly supporting the authority of those in ecclesiastical office. In an illiterate age, visible symbols mean much. The symbols of an office, whether for ruling in the church or for ruling in the political realm, naturally raised up and reflected positively on the recipient of those symbols. But the giving of the symbols also pointed back to the giver, emphasizing his power and authority as well. The importance of symbols lay behind the dramatic clash in the investiture controversy of A.D. 1077. In the German lands, it was common to have prince-bishops, with these rulers holding symbols from both the church and political realms. Therefore, it mattered a great deal who transferred the symbols to the one being installed. In the clash between Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV, the papacy gained the upper hand — another way in which clerics involved in the political process accrued yet more prestige. And their standing was protected by the institutional church, which asserted its right to supervise its own, and to mete out justice as it saw fit, basing all these claims on canon law.<sup>106</sup>

Developments such as these sketched here undermined the place of the royal priesthood in the life of the church. The early church had managed to hold up both the royal priesthood and the Office of Public Ministry, each necessary in its own way. That changed in the Middle Ages. No one of these developments was enough to tip the scales, but the accumulated effect favored those in the ordained ministry.

There were still expressions in line with the complementary relationship of the royal priesthood and the public ministry as found in the Bible and the early church. No less a thinker than Thomas Aquinas had positive things to say about the place and role of the people of the church — the laity. Aquinas saw the priesthood of Christ culminating in his passion and death on the cross.

Strict satisfaction is rendered when the individual offended is given [something he loves] as much as, or more than, he hated the offence. By suffering from [or in] Charity, Christ offered to God more than what was demanded as recompense for the sin of the whole human race. ... Head and members make up, as it were, one mystical body.

<sup>103</sup> See Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>104</sup> Eastwood, 127–31.

<sup>105</sup> Eastwood, 131–37.

<sup>106</sup> For a historical examination of these events, see Uta-Renate Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1988).

Therefore the amends made by Christ are made also by all his members. Satisfaction, however, is an external deed, for which we adopt auxiliaries, among which are reckoned our friends.<sup>107</sup>

Aquinas's comment about a surplus of satisfaction, along with his idea of adopting auxiliaries, that is, adopting means to draw down on that satisfaction, opened the door to any number of problems. Aquinas agrees with Anselm when he notes that Christ's suffering was voluntary and not required of Him for something that He owed — a good point. But problems come when that satisfaction is viewed as a kind of credit account that could be drawn down. Sin is viewed as deeds or misdeeds that need to be offset, and for that Christ's satisfaction stands ready to be used. The clerics are the ones who make the connection and square the accounts, a role that contributes to their high image. As Aquinas would write, "laypeople are united spiritually to Christ through faith and charity, but not by active sacramental power. Theirs is a spiritual priesthood."<sup>108</sup>

Yet even while Aquinas raises up the ordained clergy he still has a place for the universal priesthood. The faithful would offer up their praise and worship. It was in worship that the mass was celebrated with the ordained priest doing his work. In connection with or in the wake of that action, the people were made fit to offer their praise and service. As Aquinas wrote, "all Christian ritual derives from Christ's priesthood. As a consequence, the sacramental character manifests Christ's character, and configures the faithful to his priesthood."<sup>109</sup> Yet while the people have a role to play, their status or identity is there because of what the priest does, and any priesthood held by the people is secondary — merely "spiritual."

Others who spoke up forcefully for the people — Marsilius of Padua, for example, or John Wycliffe or John Hus — were met by ecclesiastical institutional opposition.<sup>110</sup> Marsilius argued for a church that was attuned to the weightier part of society. What exactly that meant has been much debated, but the church saw that as a threat, however it might be understood. Marsilius thought better of standing too tall and instead found refuge with the German emperor, who was no friend of Rome. John Wycliffe wrote in Latin for a more educated audience, but his ideas found their way to the common people,

who took inspiration and spoke up for their place in the church. As the pressure on him grew, Wycliffe thought it prudent to withdraw from Oxford, where his ideas were in circulation, and retreat to a small north England parish that technically had been his official site or benefice all along during the Oxford years. While John Hus would be burned at the stake when he later ran afoul of ecclesiastical authority, Wycliffe had the good fortune (?) of dying as a result of a stroke, but the church expressed its profound disagreement with Wycliffe's criticisms by having his bones exhumed and burned. In both cases there were ideas that were not welcome, ideas that challenged clerical status and privilege, but the real problem was that they were offered up so publicly.

It was possible, however, to make a case if the approach were more low key. As noted earlier, occasionally a voice could be found that echoes the balance found in the early church. The Middle Ages are not devoid of theological expressions on the topic.<sup>111</sup> On the eve of the Reformation, even with the universal priesthood much overshadowed, one more voice came from Marcus von Weida, a surprising source given his impeccable credentials: a Dominican educated at Leipzig. Yet here was an echo from times past as von Weida, in a treatise on the doctrine and practice of prayer, urged ordinary people to lift up one another before God that they might be strengthened and encouraged in the Christian life, just as believers did in the New Testament epistles. They had the right to pray to God without need of any clerical go-between. This call to lay claim to the identity as priests before God is striking, however, not only for what was said, but also because such a call was unfortunately all too rare. Marcus von Weida was far from a household name.<sup>112</sup> But things were about to change, and a light was about to shine on theological concepts and biblical truths that had been long ignored.

<sup>107</sup> Quoted from the *Summa Theologica*, 3a.48.2, in Eastwood, 141.

<sup>108</sup> *Summa Theologica*, 3a.82.1, in Eastwood, 144.

<sup>109</sup> *Summa Theologica*, 3a.68.3, in Eastwood, 148.

<sup>110</sup> See Eastwood, 163–78.

<sup>111</sup> Although space does not allow us to explore it, Eastwood notes the significance of the monastic movement and Christian mystics as examples of how the royal priesthood or the laity continued to exercise a significant role in the life of the church. The monastic movement, which was largely a lay movement, was particularly significant in the missionary expansion of the Church (see Eastwood, 179–94). Christian mystics, by giving attention to the soul's personal relationship with God, tended to draw attention away from the church as an institution and thereby diminished somewhat the power of the clergy (see Eastwood, 195–224).

<sup>112</sup> Marcus von Weida, *Ein nutzliche Lere vnd Vnderweysunge wye vn[d] was der Mensch bethen sole vnd sond'lich Außlegung des heylgen Vater Vnsers*, ed. Anthony van der Lee (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1973), 32–34.

## IV. LUTHER'S REFORMATION

*"A seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of the shepherd." — Luther (Smalcald Articles 12, 2)*

**W**ITH THE ADVENT OF THE Reformation, the royal priesthood once again came to the fore. It featured prominently as a corollary to Luther's central focus on justification by grace through faith alone. Just as justification was firmly rooted in the Word, so, too, the priesthood of believers was also anchored in Scripture. Luther's understanding of this teaching was of course shaped in some way by his social, political, and cultural context. Most fundamentally, however, Luther said what he did about the priesthood of believers simply because he believed it was biblical. The teaching grew from God's gracious action, and in turn it bore witness to the work of Christ.

The royal priesthood was tied to a different understanding of the Church, seeing the Church not as an institution but as a community of believers, created by the Holy Spirit, working through the Word. At various times Luther had different lists of what marked the Church, but each finally centered on the working of the Word of God, the Gospel, through which God gathered and sanctified the whole Christian Church on earth.<sup>113</sup> The Church for Luther was no human work but rather divine, as the Holy Spirit, by means of the Gospel Word, created and sustained the Church, "a holy little flock and community of pure saints under one head, Christ."<sup>114</sup> "God's Word cannot exist without God's people," Luther wrote, "and God's people cannot be without God's Word."<sup>115</sup> That is, the people are a Christian people because of the working

of the Word, and the Word is spread when people speak. That is the work of the priests, the believers, said Luther.

Soteriology — the doctrine of justification — was Luther's primary focus as the Reformation began. He sought a God who loved him and would accept him, but he found no solutions in theology as he initially had learned it in university and practiced it in the monastery. New approaches to learning drawn from Renaissance humanism's focus on the liberal arts helped Luther look back into the texts of Scripture, to examine the sources of Christianity in both vocabulary and grammar. There he found the message of salvation by God's grace alone, clinging to the promises God gives of love and forgiveness. Luther took his new insights into the classroom, reasoning that if his new biblical insights brought him comfort, they surely would help others who must have had the same fear and anxiety. He also presumed that others in the church structure would be happy to support his efforts to bring peace where there had been no peace and to point to the cross where the cross had been out of focus.

In fact, nothing could have been farther from the truth, and the institutional church was hardly inclined to embrace Luther's message. To do so would have brought significant change in the way things had been done within ecclesiastical circles. It is true that Luther's Ninety-Five Theses (1517), had its ideas been accepted and implemented, would have altered the practice of indulgences. That in turn would have cost the church significantly, economically speaking. But the greater threat, posed not just by the Ninety-Five Theses but also by other treatises Luther penned in that same timeframe, was to the au-

<sup>113</sup> SC, "Creed," 5–6, KW, 355–56.

<sup>114</sup> LC, "Creed," 51, KW, 437.

<sup>115</sup> *On the Councils and the Church*, AE 41:150, WA 50:629.



thority of the Roman church. Change that Luther sought would have resulted in a far different approach and attitude on the part of the institutional church, but that church was not interested in retooling its message or in relinquishing the power and authority it firmly held and used. The clergy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy were not interested in what Luther had found in the Word.

The response of the institution was a problem, to be sure, but it was not ultimately fatal, because as Luther came to see, the Word he sought to spread with its Law/Gospel message and the other means of saving grace that also brought that Word were not the personal possession of the clergy or the institutional church. Rather the Word belongs to the Church, understood in a different, biblical way, namely, the Church as the universal royal priesthood. The Church was the communion of people made believers by the Spirit, gathered into the body of Christ, and then moved by that same Spirit to do their work as priests, proclaiming the wonderful works of God. The people were not the tail on the ecclesiastical dog that depended on the clerics. Rather they were Christ's precious people with voices to give an account of the hope that was in them (1 PETER 3:15). So while Luther's main Reformation focus was on justification, he quickly saw the importance of the believer-priests making Christ's work known to others.

Although Luther added to his concept of the Church throughout his career, from his early lectures until late in his life, it was particularly from 1518 to 1521 that he published many of his ideas on ecclesiology and the royal priesthood. He unfolded the biblical teachings of churchly authority resting in the Word of God (not in the institution itself), the marks of the Church (all tied to the Word), the fallibility of ecclesial structures (councils and papacy), the distinction between a spiritual Church whose members God knew as He saw the hearts of His pure new creation and a visible church whose members also are known to God (but which surely exists as a *corpus permixtum*, a body that includes both believers and hypocrites). And, of course, also included was the priesthood of the baptized, along with a rejection of the Roman notion that the ordained were "spiritual" and holy while the baptized were not.<sup>116</sup>

While Rome would have trouble with all of these

<sup>116</sup> See also Thomas Winger, "Pastor and People Together in Christ's Church" (Lutheran Church — Canada, Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 2008), <http://www.lutheranchurch.ca/ctcr/Study%20and%20Response/Pastor%20and%20People%20Together%20in%20Christ's%20Church.pdf>. See also Carl Axel Aurelius, *Verborgene Kirche: Luthers Kirchenverständnis aufgrund seiner Streitschriften und Exegese*

points, the matter of the priesthood of believers set over against the clerical hierarchy was a particular problem. Rome may claim that its polemics against Luther were necessary to defend the place and role of its ministry, but the responses to Luther were, in point of fact, defenses of the authority and power of the Roman hierarchy. Luther's preparation for the Leipzig Debate particularly focused on authority, Scripture and Church. Prior to the debate Luther had decided that the Roman church was not equivalent to Christ's Church.<sup>117</sup> Scripture reigns over popes and all else in the true Church. More, Christ had given the preaching of the Gospel of forgiveness of sins — the keys — to the Church, and so the Church ought to be about the business of feeding the sheep with Word and Sacrament.<sup>118</sup> During the Leipzig Debate, Luther doubled down with his claim that some such as Hus and the Bohemians had been wrongly condemned by a church that was itself, in fact, failing in the mission it had been given by Christ. Clearly there was a disconnect between present practice and what Christ had commanded His followers to do, beginning with the apostles.

After Leipzig Luther continued down the path focused on the authority of Scripture and the Church as the communion of saints. In his *Treatise on the New Testament* (1520), he first speaks of the Church as the universal priesthood of the baptized, while calling the Pope both tyrant and Antichrist.<sup>119</sup> Speaking of the believers he writes: "Each and all are, therefore, equally spiritual priests before God."<sup>120</sup> At the same time Rome continued down its own path, rejecting Luther. Those ideas and more were condemned in the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* (1520), threatening Luther with excommunication that would come in January of the following year. Luther's thinking was not always perfectly consistent, but, above all, the Church is an assembly of the believers, created by the Spirit. He knows that in this life there are necessary institutions and structures that can (or should) see to the preaching of the Word through which the Spirit works to make believers. And it is within this structure or institution that people gather to worship and hear the Word, to have the keys exercised and sins forgiven. Where faith is

1519–1521 (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1983).

<sup>117</sup> See Scott Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 81–85; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 118–22.

<sup>118</sup> See *Explanation of Proposition Thirteen Concerning the Power of the Pope*, WA 2:183–240.

<sup>119</sup> AE 35:79–111; WA 6:353–78.

<sup>120</sup> AE 35:101.

worked by such means, those who hear and believe are priests, that is, Church in the primary sense.

Luther's expulsion came in no small part because of his 1520 writings. *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and *The Freedom of the Christian* all hit at institutional authority and false views of the ordained ministry in different ways.<sup>121</sup> Behind his arguments for what the Church was not lay the idea of what the Church was and is: the priesthood of all believers. All Christians are priests even though not all are pastors or ministers. The difference lies not in status but in the office or call they have and its particular responsibilities. In *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Luther demolishes three "walls" that the Roman church had erected: the division between "spiritual" (clergy) and "secular" (laity) classes; the papal claim that only Rome (not ordinary Christians) could rightly interpret Scripture; and that the pope was not subject to reproof from the rest of the church.<sup>122</sup> Therefore, "secular" rulers too are spiritual and they rightly may intervene in order to make provision for the preaching of the Gospel. How can they do this when they are not clerics? They are baptized Christians, they are priests. "Since those who exercise secular authority have been baptized with the same Baptism, and have the same faith and the same gospel as the rest of us, we must admit that they are priests and bishops and we must regard their office as one which has a proper and useful place in the Christian community."<sup>123</sup> Why do rulers do this and not others? Because while rulers and their people are all baptized priests, rulers have an oversight role, rather like fathers for children. They have a particular office, thereby determining the specific ways that they serve as members of the royal priesthood. The first to provide for right preaching should be the bishops and clerics themselves, but when they fail then rulers might intervene.

There are echoes here of Old Testament kings providing for right theology for Israel, even though those kings were not Levites. Closer to his own time, Luther could point to the right claimed by emperors already for several centuries, who saw themselves as patrons and defenders of the church in their lands. But Luther has an added twist: Rulers have the right to step in if necessary because they are baptized priests who find themselves in a role where they have opportunity to do right in

providing for the Word. Rome had thrown up walls of different sorts of clerical privilege and authority. Luther saw authority in the Word wielded by priests, that is, by baptized believers.

Luther's charge against Rome in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* is that the institutional hierarchy bolstered its claim of authority not only by claiming to control sacraments that were not sacraments, but also when it held true sacraments hostage, treating them as a work and thereby failing to offer comfort and peace through free grace that forgives. Holding sacraments captive meant that people were captive. In fact, those gifts had been given not to the magisterium but to the Church. All believers possess these gifts and, as priests, can see to their exercise.

If they were forced to grant that all of us that have been baptized are equally priests, as indeed we are, and that only the ministry was committed to them, yet with our common consent, they would then know that they have no right to rule over us except insofar as we freely concede it. For thus it is written in 1 Peter 2[:9]: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a priestly royalty." Therefore we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians.<sup>124</sup>

He then adds this:

Let everyone, therefore, who knows himself to be a Christian, be assured of this, that we are all equally priests, that is to say, we have the same power in respect to the Word and the sacraments. However, no one may make use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior. (For what is the common property of all, no individual may arrogate to himself, unless he is called.) And therefore this "sacrament" of ordination, if it is anything at all, is nothing else than a certain rite whereby one is called to the ministry of the church. Furthermore, the priesthood is properly nothing but the ministry of the Word — the Word, I say; not the law, but the gospel.<sup>125</sup>

Luther's teaching is clear. He fully opposed the clericalism of Rome with its claim to a higher status for the ordained than the laity. Indeed, he charged the Roman church with establishing a counterfeit priesthood

<sup>121</sup> *To the Christian Nobility* is in AE 44; *Babylonian Captivity* in AE 36; *Freedom of a Christian* in AE 31.

<sup>122</sup> AE 44:123–39.

<sup>123</sup> AE 44:129.

<sup>124</sup> AE 36:112–13.

<sup>125</sup> AE 36:116.

— priests who did not do the chief work of the New Testament priesthood, to proclaim the Word of God. This does not put every Christian into the public office, but it emphasizes the clergy's role as servant rather than ruler. More importantly, it emphasizes that the work of the public office — a work done by the consent of the community — is the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel.

In *The Freedom of the Christian*, while making a number of other comparisons, Luther distinguishes between the priesthood of believers and the ministry of the Word (the public office filled by the clergy). Luther writes, "Although we all are equally priests, we cannot all publicly minister and teach. We ought not even if we could."<sup>126</sup> Clearly clerics are not given higher status over the priests, that is, over the believers. (Indeed, the clergy are not separate from the believers. They themselves are believers, called to the task of public ministry for the sake and good of the others.) All believers, all priests, could fill the public office, yet they don't. (This is not simply a pragmatic matter — that not all could fit into the pulpit, or if all baptized on Sunday, the child might drown for all the water poured. There are additional biblical expectations and qualifications in the pastoral epistles to be honored that include one's sex, the condition of one's family life, one's ability and reputation, and so forth. Luther elsewhere talks of these.)

Clearly Luther and the church of Rome were not on the same page when it comes to understanding the nature of Church and the locus of spiritual authority. His stand at Worms has been called "pastoral and not political" while standing up against an "unfaithful hierarchy on behalf of the faithful people."<sup>127</sup> Although there were obvious ecclesiastical implications, Luther's primary focus and intent were spiritual. He spoke out for the good of the true holy Church, the people of God, not the good of Rome. Although reform of the institution would be welcome, his concern was for the good of the community of believers.

After Worms, Rome ramped up the pressure through polemicists such as Augustine Alveld and Jerome Emser, and Luther responded with several sharply worded rebuttals. One in particular is his *Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig*.<sup>128</sup> Luther's answer to Emser is important because Luther repeats his argument that all

believers share in a common priesthood. Church and ministry relate to that, with the Word as the foundation and authority. Luther's description in this piece of what the church is was then followed by another making clear what the church is not. In *Against the Spiritual Estate of the Pope and the Bishops, Falsely So Called*, Luther again rejects ecclesiastical orders as a sacrament and maintains that clerics are not a separate spiritual estate within the church.<sup>129</sup> The clerics do indeed have a responsibility given them to feed God's people with the Gospel and to set right things around them that are wrong in the church, but they have failed on all counts. Fortunately, God's people are not dependent on such priests but rather are buoyed up by the Word that they have in and among themselves.

Decades later Luther still held to this line when preaching on Matthew 18:15–20. He was more than happy when the Gospel was used within the institutional structures, but unfortunately, it too often was ignored while sacerdotal privilege was defended. But because the church was not fixed to a particular ecclesiastical expression (Rome), the priests, those baptized believers, could and should do their work of proclaiming the Gospel wherever they were found. Luther said of the Matthew verses:

Here Jesus is saying that he does not only want [the condemnation of sin and proclamation of the forgiveness of sins] to take place in the church, but he also gives this right and freedom where two or three are gathered together, so that among them the comfort and the forgiveness of sins may be proclaimed and pronounced. He pours out [his forgiveness] even more richly and places the forgiveness of sins for them in every corner, so that they not only find the forgiveness of sins in the congregation but also at home in their houses, in the fields and gardens, wherever one of them comes to another in search of comfort and deliverance. It shall be at my disposal when I am troubled and sorry, in tribulation and vulnerable, when I need something, at whatever hour and time it may be. There is not always a sermon being given publicly in the church, so when my brother or neighbor comes to me, I am to lay my troubles before my neighbor and ask for comfort. ... again I should comfort others, and say, "dear friend, dear

<sup>126</sup> AE 31:356; WA 7:58.

<sup>127</sup> Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 133–34.

<sup>128</sup> AE 39:121–224; WA 7:271–83. Emser's coat of arms featured a goat's

head, prompting Luther to nickname him "the Leipzig Goat."

<sup>129</sup> AE 39:247–99; WA 10/II:105–58.



brother, why don't you lay aside your burdens. It is certainly not God's will that you experience this suffering. God had his Son die for you so that you do not sorrow but rejoice."<sup>130</sup>

Luther's defense of the priesthood of believers, of the baptized, should not be understood as a rejection of the ministry, the public office, the pastor/minister. The priesthood and ministry are not mutually exclusive. The pastor is also a priest/believer who happens to serve in a particular way because he is asked to do so by the priests or by others on behalf of the royal priesthood. What happens when the ecclesiastical institution and its clergy see things differently as if they have the authority in themselves rather than pointing to the Word where authority lies? There were no organizational flowcharts in that day, but had there been, it would have been easy to plot things as the ecclesiastical institution saw them: The power arrows would begin with and flow from clerics to the people, who are on the receiving end. Luther saw cases of that in Bohemia and Leisnig in Saxony, both of which sought Luther's advice and support as they tried to fill the pastorate with someone who they thought would preach the Gospel. This was unacceptable to Rome, who wanted to guard its prerogatives and control the appointment and so remind all concerned, people and pastor, who was really in charge and where authority lay.

Luther responded with *That a Christian Assembly or Congregation has the Right and Power to Judge Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture* (1523).<sup>131</sup> Once the title is read, there is no doubt about Luther's position. Not only, said Luther, does the congregation have the right to call its own pastor, it had the responsibility to depose one who spoke contrary to the Word of God. While all baptized believers have the right and duty to proclaim the Word, were someone to be called to Leisnig, that person then would have the office of preaching, the public office that serves the congregation, and that person by faithfully fulfilling the office deserves respect.

As an aside, there is much here that is helpful both to a congregation that does not quite understand this relationship and to clerics who balk at the priesthood of believers because they believe it is simply a cover for a "hire and fire" mentality. The pastor has respect not because he demands it or because he is owed it by virtue of filling a slot on an ecclesiastical flowchart, but rather

because he serves the priests with the Word. Any variation of "pray, pay and obey" has no place. Rather because he loves Christ's people and loves what he does, he would rejoice that baptized believers carry the Word with them in hearts and minds and use it wherever and whenever they can. This is no threat to the office, but speaks well of the upbuilding of the body in which the holder of the office takes part with his own use of the Word. Conversely, with such a faithful ministry where people are fed and comforted by the Word, the "hire and fire" problem is diminished. And when the people understand that the public preaching office is not their creation but something Christ gave His Church for their good, they see things in a different light and hold a faithful occupant in high regard.

The relationship Luther outlines in his 1523 defense of the congregation's "right and power" is not extraordinary but fundamental. Extraordinary, which one hopes is the exception to the rule, is when those entrusted with administration fail to do their duty and so necessitate what looks to be an innovation but in fact is simply exercising the relationship between priests and minister that should always exist.

Another case of the power arrows on the flowchart being misdirected prompted Luther in 1523 to send to Prague his treatise *Concerning the Ministry*.<sup>132</sup> This is another look at the relationship of the baptized priesthood and the public office. Luther returned here to ideas he had earlier expressed in *The Address to the Christian Nobility*. All Christians are priests and all priests are Christians, equal because of their Baptism. All priests have the full right to exercise the functions of their priesthood, namely, "to teach, to preach and proclaim the word of God, to baptize, to consecrate or administer the Eucharist, to bind and loose sins, to pray for others, to sacrifice, and to judge of all doctrine and spirits."<sup>133</sup> That is one of Luther's "marks of the church" lists. Different lists made on different occasions vary in what is included, but every item rests upon the Word. (This is true even when there are but two items, the Word preached and Sacraments rightly administered, as Luther understood the Sacraments to be another form of preaching the Word.) The Word, in turn, makes all those on the list possible and efficacious.

<sup>130</sup> *Sermons on Matthew 18–24*, AE 67:407–8, 1539–40; WA 47:297–98.

<sup>131</sup> AE 39:305–14; WA 11:408–16.

<sup>132</sup> AE 40:7–44; WA 12:169–95.

<sup>133</sup> AE 40:21; WA 12:179–80.

While describing the priesthood and what it does, Luther also distinguishes between that priesthood of the baptized and the public office of preaching the word. “No individual can arise by his own authority and arrogate to himself alone what belongs to all.”<sup>134</sup> “A priest is not identical with a presbyter or minister for one is born a priest, one is made a minister.”<sup>135</sup> Luther goes on to urge that where Christians do not have someone in the public office, someone should be selected from the priesthood of the baptized and should be put into the office in the way that signifies the task assumed. So the community lays hands upon the person to show that he is now pastor or bishop.<sup>136</sup> When that happens, then all should “believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that this has been done and accomplished by God.”<sup>137</sup>

This approach is biblical, Luther insists, and the public office “established by holy ordination is the highest and greatest of the functions of the church, on which the whole power of the church depends since the church is nothing without the word and everything that exists by virtue of the word alone.”<sup>138</sup> There can be other procedures through which the ministers can be chosen. Episcopal oversight and appointment as found in Rome’s practice could also do, provided the point that structure was not to preserve ecclesiastical, episcopal authority but to find an informed and efficient way to provide pastors. (Bishops ought not act on their own, Luther had said in his treatise to Leisnig, but ought to ask the congregation what kind of man they seek and should work with them to get the right person. Bishops were to serve, not rule.) Other circumstances prevented Luther’s suggestions from being implemented in Bohemia, but the point remains that Luther commended a view of the church that would include the priesthood of the baptized being active in countless ways in the ministry of the Word, while not undermining the public preaching office. As a royal priesthood they would ask one (or more) from among them to occupy the public preaching office for the good of the baptized priesthood as a whole.

As the decade of the 1520s wore on and as other developments arose in the church, Luther’s emphasis shifted somewhat. After about 1527 Luther tended to distinguish more between the priesthood and the public

office. He did not depart from the idea that all priests possess all the same rights and responsibilities, but he also noted that not every individual baptized Christian is prepared to fulfill every task, with some better suited for some things than others. That is no denial of the priest being in full possession of all that God gives, but rather it is recognition that God also gives talents and abilities differently to various people. In addition, problems arose with the Radical Reformation’s Anabaptists and Spiritualists, who claimed revelation apart from and beyond the biblical word, not only challenging the Word but also claiming a special position or authority. In reply, Luther maintained that no one has either the right to lay hold of what is common to all or the right to fill the preaching office without the consent of those who would be served. It is the community of priests — the congregation in most cases — that calls someone to the public office and bestows on that person the right to use the gifts that belong to all.

That such problems sprang from the tumult involved with the Reformation does not discredit Luther’s positions on the universal priesthood or its relationship to the office occupied by one of the baptized priests. It simply made it harder to steer the course while avoiding an increasing number of competing positions, ideas that Luther saw as Satan’s way of attacking that which Christ had established and which His Word sought to preserve and expand. Luther had hoped that all the preaching and writing and teaching of the Gospel that had gone on in the decade since the Ninety-Five Theses would have helped the baptized understand their identity, grow in their faith and take up the right use of the Word in their homes within their families and beyond in witness to others. As the Gospel became clear in those early years, Luther confidently expected the Gospel would work, change hearts and minds and so reform the institutional church.

In fact, the parish visitations done a decade later in Saxony in 1528 found that often little progress had been made. Some might see this as proof that the Reformation was a failure, with a message that carried no weight and made little difference. Actually not all was abysmal, and there were positive examples to be found. But on balance there was reason to be disappointed. Luther understood, of course, that this was not a matter simply of following a formula. There were complicating factors: the devil, the world and the sinful flesh still plagued those reborn at the font. It was up to the priesthood to keep trying, and up to God to grant success when and where He want-

<sup>134</sup> AE 40:34; WA 12:189.

<sup>135</sup> AE 40:18; WA 12:178.

<sup>136</sup> AE 40:40; WA 12:193–94.

<sup>137</sup> AE 40:37; WA 12:191.

<sup>138</sup> AE 40:11; WA 12:173.

ed. Doing what he could, Luther sought to build up the priesthood by reminding them that they, still plagued by sin, were daily dying and rising again to new life in Christ. The lessons are to be found in the catechisms he wrote in the wake of the visitations to help both the priesthood and those in the public office better teach the faith. Continued problems and challenges were evidence that sin is still loose and needs to be confronted and the sinner still needs to be crushed and then raised up with Christ's gracious Gospel. Yet despite problems, the continued presence of the baptized priesthood showed that the Gospel did its work, even in the most challenging circumstances.

As the Reformation moved into the 1530s, Luther's attention shifted again. The evangelical movement had grown in the tumultuous 1520s. What might be next? In hindsight we know how the story would go, but at the time, who knew what would come if and when Emperor Charles, who had gone off to war after Worms, would return and focus on his Empire? After nearly a decade away, Charles returned in 1530 to preside over the gathering in Augsburg (Diet of Augsburg) of the representatives drawn from throughout the various lands. He wanted the Reformation problem ended to make for a stronger Empire. At Augsburg the Lutherans were called to account, pressed to demonstrate that they really were within the realm of "church." If not, then they legally had no place in the Empire.

It is a good and basic question: Were they really church? In one way the evangelicals had no quarrel living with the ecclesiastical structures. In some of his treatises Luther tried to sort through problems in that area and hoped for better to come from those filling various roles. Too often, however, the Roman structures and leadership failed to provide the kind of theology the Lutherans thought should be there. That theology, especially the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone, which was at the core of their Augsburg Confession, was also important for the "church question," for it was the Gospel that made priests. As the Spirit worked, the Gospel created the Church. The gathering of believers certainly did not need structures when Church was understood only as a spiritual assembly. But as people living in the created order, they reasonably would expect to have structures. There they could live with any number of options so long as the Gospel predominates to define identity and empower service.

Rome was unhappy both with the Lutherans' view toward "church" (meaning the ecclesiastical institutions) and with their theology that embraced and held high an understanding of the "Church" as all believers and a royal priesthood. The priesthood of believers resting on the Word was one of the prime offending doctrines, if for no other reason than that it challenged the ecclesiastical hierarchy and shifted the focal point of authority. So Rome rejected Luther's idea that there was only one priesthood with no second, special and higher priesthood peopled by clerics under their structure and authority. For Luther "priest" was first and foremost the baptized believer, not the minister called to fill the public preaching office.

The Diet of Augsburg did not settle things. Lutherans were threatened: Give up your positions and return to the fold, or else. The "or else" ultimately could mean war. While such threats occupied princely rulers, Luther had other things to think about. Called to govern in a different way, the Reformation had brought much change. Yet much of the old, particularly in terms not only of structure but also message, remained the same. Luther had hoped that the Gospel when unleashed would sweep everything clean, but that had not happened. What was left in terms of the institutional church in Rome (and there was much) was opposed to the Lutherans.

As time wore on, Luther found himself essentially with a new and parallel church looking to him for organization and ecclesiastical leadership. With all else Luther had thought through, he had never made plans for revamping the institution. He had hoped what was in place would change and thus serve well, but not so. As the 1530s dawned, Luther was forced to deal with any number of requests that would otherwise have gone to a bishop, and Luther became, somewhat to his dismay, a church bureaucrat.<sup>139</sup> He certainly had not lost sight of the priesthood of believers. That was church. But as *de facto* leader of the reform, he had to advise on practice and handle issues of casuistry. He would rather have spent the time preaching the Gospel and would have been happy with an evangelically oriented episcopacy for the other work. Luther tended to live with what was there so long as it did not impede the Gospel. But by now it was clear that that was not going to work. So he turned to princes to act as emergency bishops and supported superintendents set up as a substitute for the old-style bishops who were bypassed and benevolently grandfathered until attrition took its course.

<sup>139</sup> James Kittelson, "Luther the Church Bureaucrat," *Concordia Journal* 13 (October 1987): 294–306.



Despite growing tensions within the Empire and frustrations felt by those with vested interests in the church in a visible sense, Luther continued to hold to a simple understanding of Church and the priesthood — the believers — that made up the Church. He seemed to echo the simplicity yet depth of the Augsburg Confession's *satis est* (Article VII: "It is enough for the unity of the church ...). In the Smalcald Articles (1536), Luther offered another elegant view of Church plainly evident to anyone in the baptized priesthood: "A seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of the shepherd."<sup>140</sup> No institutionally defined positions, no tonsures, gowns or posturing. Children need only hear Christ's voice, His message — the love and the forgiving grace — and they know: there is Church, and we who follow that voice are Church. The Word and the Spirit in the Word create and sustain that. Clerics serve when they repeat the voice, and the baptized priests serve when they use the Word in witness. That simple, pure understanding carried the baptized priesthood through despite furious arguments over Church that continued to the end of Luther's life. It is no different for the priesthood of believers still these days.

When Luther died in Eisleben in 1546, a scrap of paper was found in the bed covers. After thousands of pages and well over a hundred volumes, these were the last lines he wrote. They are colored by Renaissance liberal arts learning, with references to classical antiquity Luther enlisted — "baptized" so to speak — as he commented on the life of the believer.

No one who has not been a shepherd or a peasant for five years can understand Virgil in his *Bucolics* and *Georgics*. I hold that no one can understand Cicero in his letters unless he has been involved in efforts to govern the state for twenty years. And let no one who has not guided congregations with the prophets for a hundred years believe he has tasted Holy Scripture thoroughly. Because of this the miracle is tremendous in John the Baptist, in Christ, and in the apostles. Lay not your hand on this divine *Aeneid*, but bow before it and adore its every trace. We are beggars. This is true.<sup>141</sup>

Life experience helps in understanding the texts of Virgil on agricultural life, of Cicero on politics and statecraft, and of the Scriptures. But notice: a hundred years first?! Impossible? Yes, and so what was accomplished

by Christ and others is indeed miraculous. But while experience helps in understanding texts, in fact the texts, particularly the texts that deliver the Word, also work from their end. They address the believer and carry the believer through when falling back on one's own history will never be enough. The Word makes the believer, makes priests from the font forward. The Word makes the Church. And the Church constantly uses the Word, because the learning and the growth about the one thing needful never end.

And the response of the priesthood? There is a saying attributed to Luther: *Wenn zur Theologie kommt, eine gewisse Bescheidenheit gehört dazu*. "When it comes to theology, a certain modesty is called for." Modesty. Do not presume to say you thoroughly know you have exhausted the Word until you have been at this a hundred years (at least!). Modesty. Put another way: awe, admiration and praise. The *Aeneid* is Virgil's story of Aeneas having to leave his old, fallen city of Troy laid waste in the war and find his way eventually to a new city, a new place: Rome. It is a story of a journey, an odyssey through life. The "divine *Aeneid*" is the Bible, a story of another pilgrimage from Eden to and through the cross and the empty tomb, and on to a new place, to a new heaven and earth even now on the way, the culmination of a new life by grace and promise.

The story is not yet done. People continue to travel. And as they do, that Word makes them priests to serve along the way, giving thanks for who they are, raising doxology for how they came to be priests and for all the Word does, and proclaiming the message of that Divine *Aeneid*, the saving Word that makes more and more priests, that makes Christ's Church. A hundred years experience to have things thoroughly in hand? Not by a long shot. But we in the priesthood of believers hear and know the voice of the Shepherd and know this is the way to go.

<sup>140</sup> SA III 12:2, KW, 324. See also FC SD X 19, KW, 639.

<sup>141</sup> AE 54:476; WA-Tr 5:5677.

## V. CONCLUSION

*“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” Revelation 1:5–6*

**THIS STUDY IS NECESSARILY LIMITED** in several ways. It does not, for example, explore the doctrine of the royal priesthood in the time since the Reformation and therefore does not trace its recent history in the LCMS. Nor does it provide suggested in-depth, extensive applications for the royal priesthood in the church today. The 2007 LCMS convention directed the CTCR “to prepare a comprehensive study document which clearly presents the biblical teaching of the royal priesthood and Luther’s teaching on vocation.” The resolution then added that it was to carry out this study “in the light of the mission challenges of today.”<sup>142</sup> In the foregoing sections, that is what the Commission has sought to do by indicating in each place not only biblical teaching, but also how that teaching assumes and directs a significant role for the laity, the whole of the royal priesthood, in the church’s missionary outreach, making God’s mighty acts known to all people.

The following conclusions flow from the foregoing pages. They summarize biblical teaching on the royal priesthood, as well as Luther’s, and enable us to see the crucial and necessary connections of the royal priesthood to “the mission challenges of today” and, for that matter, every day.

1. The Royal Priesthood is a biblical way to identify, teach and confess the “one, holy, catholic (Christian), and apostolic Church.” That is to say, the royal priesthood is all believers, “from every tribe

and language and people and nation” whom God has made a kingdom and priests (REV. 5:9–10) by working in them faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

2. Individuals become priests of the royal priesthood, the Church, by the saving promises of Baptism into Christ, where we receive the washing of rebirth, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (JOHN 3:5; ACTS 2:38–39; TITUS 3:5).
3. The royal priesthood finds its identity only in Christ, the Great High Priest and only mediator between God and man. Royal priests are in turn called to lives of priestly mediation between God and the world. They offer living sacrifices of thanksgiving — not sacrifices of merit or atonement. In prayer they intercede on behalf of all people. They make known the excellencies of God in Christ — sharing His Word, gifts and blessings with all nations. (See 1 TIM. 2:5; ROM. 12:1; PHIL. 4:6; 1 PETER 2:9.)
4. As the people of God, both corporately and individually, we mediate God’s truth of salvation and life to the world around us. Every individual believer is called to confess the faith to others since the mission of the whole church, that is, the entire royal priesthood, is to make disciples of all nations (MATT. 28:19–20). Members of the royal priesthood share in that calling as they give a defense for

<sup>142</sup> “2007 Resolution 1–03,” first resolve.

the hope that is within them in their daily lives  
(1 PETER 3:15).

5. Each royal priest is to exercise the functions of the royal priesthood — sacrifice, prayer, proclamation — in a way that accords with his or her vocations within the three estates of home, church and society. (See EPH. 5–6; COL. 3; 1 TIM. 2.)
6. The Holy Spirit is at work wherever the saving work of God in Christ is made known, whether that message is delivered by a layman or a pastor. The Gospel alone is the power of salvation (ROM. 1:16). This means that the proclamation of the Gospel by members of the royal priesthood as they speak of Christ to others, at home, with fellow believers and in society, is an effective means of grace by which the Holy Spirit creates and nurtures saving faith (ACTS 11:19–24).
7. The royal priesthood does not undermine or negate the Office of the Public Ministry, which Christ gives to the Church. Members of the royal priesthood, in various ways, choose individuals from among them who are equipped to teach and called in an orderly manner to hold the Office of Public Ministry and to perform its distinctive functions. (See 1 COR. 4:1; 12:28–29; EPH. 4:11; JAMES 3:1; TITUS 1:5.)

Having completed this report, the Commission is preparing a follow-up Bible study for congregational use.

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” Revelation 1:5–6

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