



## THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

BY ART LINDSLEY, PH.D.

There is an important biblical idea that has great implications for our personal spirituality and public life in the Church and in the world: the idea that every believer is a priest, regardless of his or her full-time occupation. This notion was one of the top three ideas of the Protestant Reformation. The first two, *Sola Scriptura*—which asserts the sole authority of Scripture—and *Sola Fide*—which teaches justification by faith alone—have been widely taught, but the notion of the “priesthood of all believers” has been by far the most neglected. Martin Luther thought that “this word priest should become as common as the word Christian” because all Christians are priests.<sup>1</sup> Yet for whatever reason, the priesthood of all believers has been much less understood, taught, and expounded upon in writing.

When Luther referred to the priesthood of all believers, he was maintaining that the plowboy and the milkmaid could do priestly work. In fact, their plowing and milking was priestly work. So there was no hierarchy where the priesthood was a “vocation” and milking the cow was not. Both were tasks that God called his followers to do, each according to their gifts.

This has enormous implications for how Christians live their daily lives. If the Church teaches that working in business, communications, politics, or any other profession is just as impactful as working directly in the ministry, it allows Christians to connect their beliefs to their everyday actions, giving them purpose in their jobs and equipping to them to serve others and improve society through their daily work. On the other hand, if the Church implies that the ministry is a higher calling than other professions, it will lose the impact that it has on individuals and society through “secular” vocations.

Clearly, the idea of the “priesthood of all believers” is vital for the health and effectiveness of the Church. Perhaps one reason for its neglect is that the “priesthood of all believers” is seen as a negative, controversial subject. It implies the rejection of the Roman Catholic idea of priesthood. This implication is certainly present in the concept that Luther put forth:

*In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit carefully avoids giving the same ‘sacerdos’ priest, to any of the apostles or to any other office. Rather he accepts this name to the baptized, or Christians, as their birthright and heredity name...none of us is born an apostle, preacher, teacher, pastor; but there all of us are born solely priests. Then we*

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude: Preached and Explained* (New York, NY, Anson D.F. Randolph, 1859), 106.

*take some from among these born priest and call and elect them to these offices that they may discharge the duties of the office in the name of all of us.*<sup>2</sup>

However, it would be a mistake to focus on a purely negative meaning of this idea. Along with this rejection of a separate order of priests, there is a positive call for us as believers to exercise certain priestly roles. There are both privileges and responsibilities that come with being a “priest.”

### **Priesthood of All Believers in Scripture**

The priesthood of all believers is based on the clear teaching of Scripture. The Old Testament anticipated this teaching when God said to his people at Sinai, “You shall be to me a kingdom of *priests* and a holy nation.”<sup>3</sup> Isaiah says that a time will come when “You shall be called the *priests* of the Lord, they shall speak to you as the ministers of our God.”<sup>4</sup>

The New Testament points to the reality accomplished. In 1 Peter 2:5, it says to believers that “you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy *priesthood* to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” The passage goes on to say, “You are a chosen race, a royal *priesthood*, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession that you may proclaim the excellences of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”<sup>5</sup> In Revelation it says, “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and has made us a kingdom, priest to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.”<sup>6</sup> Revelation echoes the reality prophesied in Exodus 19:6 “Thou hast made them a kingdom and priest to our God and they shall reign on earth.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Theological Background**

The theological background for this idea is Christ’s high priesthood. Christ is the High Priest who ends all priesthood. The Old Testament passage most often quoted by the New Testament is Psalm 110:1-4. In verse 4 it says, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind. Thou art a Priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” Hebrews 7 offers a full scale explanation of this priesthood. Christ’s priesthood is not from the tribe of Levi as was all Old Testament priesthood. He is a priest not of the old order but of a new order, that of Melchizedek. Christ is sinless whereas priests were sinful. Christ offered himself whereas priests offered bulls and goats. Christ’s sacrifice is once for all whereas the priest’s sacrifice was ongoing and continual. Because of this higher order of priesthood, all human priesthood is fulfilled and abolished. Yet strangely because of Christ’s high priesthood, and because we are now in him, Christians have all become priests. Because of Christ, believers are now all prophets, priests, and kings. His followers are now part of a “royal priesthood” that prophetically proclaims his message.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publ. House, 1959), 1140.

<sup>3</sup> Exod. 19:6.

<sup>4</sup> Isa. 61:6.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 2.

<sup>6</sup> Rev. 1:6.

<sup>7</sup> Rev 5:10.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Peter 2:9.

## Application

There are at least four positive implications of the priesthood of all believers for our lives. The first two are spiritual privileges and the last two are responsibilities for our work in the Church and the world.

### 1. Direct Access to God

In the Old Testament, only the high priest could enter into the Holy of Holies. Today, we have the privilege of direct access to God through Christ. We can come boldly unto the throne of grace. According to Ephesians, it is because of Christ that “we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.”<sup>9</sup> The book of Hebrews tells us to have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus: “Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.”<sup>10</sup> This is a tremendous privilege, yet it is so easy for us to neglect it. We take prayer and its power for granted. J.C. Ryle says in his classic chapter on prayer in *Practical Religion*,

*Nothing seems to be too great, too hard, or too difficult for prayer to do. It has obtained things that seemed impossible and out of reach. It has won victories over fire, air, earth, and water. Prayer opened the Red Sea. Prayer brought water from the rock and bread from heaven. Prayer made the sun stand still. Prayer brought fire from the sky on Elijah's sacrifice. Prayer turned the counsel of Ahitophel into foolishness. Prayer overthrew the army of Sennacherib. Well might Mary, Queen of Scots say, "I fear John Knox's prayer more than an army of ten thousand men." Prayer has healed the sick. Prayer has raised the dead. Prayer has procured the conversion of souls. "The child of many prayers," said an old Christian to Augustine's mother, "shall never perish." Prayers, pains, and faith can do anything.<sup>11</sup>*

When we fail to utilize this privilege, the consequence is spiritual decline. Again Ryle articulates it well:

*Bibles read without prayer, sermons heard without prayer, marriages contracted without prayer, the daily act of private prayer itself hurried over or gone through without heart, these are the kind of downward steps by which many a Christian descends into a condition of spiritual palsy, or reaches a point where God allows him (or her) to have a tremendous fall...We may be sure that many fall in private long before they fall in public.<sup>12</sup>*

### 2. Spiritual Sacrifices

We are still to offer sacrifices. However, these are no longer offerings of bulls and goats but sacrifices such as prayer, praise, thanksgiving, repentance, justice, kindness, and love. 1 Peter 2:5 spells out this function. We are a holy priesthood in order to “offer up spiritual sacrifices wholly acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In Romans 12:1, we are to offer our lives as “living sacrifices,” in Philippians 2:17, “a sacrificial offering of faith,” in Philippians 4:18, the “services of love as a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.” In Hebrews 13:15, the spiritual sacrifice is praise and thanksgiving: “Through him let us continually offer up

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<sup>9</sup> Eph. 3:12.

<sup>10</sup> Heb. 10:19, 22.

<sup>11</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Practical Religion* (Darlington: Evangelical, 2001), 73.

<sup>12</sup> Ryle, 79.

a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.” Above all, believers can be confident that God will accept their sacrifice.

### **3. Prophetic Role**

As a “royal priesthood,” one of our responsibilities is to “declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that all should be preachers or teachers. There are about thirty terms used in the New Testament to describe different kinds of prophetic proclamation: announce, explain, say, testify, persuade, confess, charge, rebuke, admonish, exhort, etc. Everyone can and should bear witness to Christ in some way—according to their gifts.

John 16 says that the Holy Spirit was sent in order to “convict the world” of “sin, righteousness, and judgment.”<sup>14</sup> This certainly does apply to evangelism. We need the Spirit’s help in personal proclamation. However this “convicting of the world” can also apply to public prophetic proclamation not only in preaching but in politics, business, law, and other arenas where believers need power to speak about their cause. It is a great challenge to speak publically about sin, righteousness, or judgment, but we can ask for the Spirit’s help.

In order to proclaim rightly, we need wisdom. Hebrews 5 tells us that we should not remain babes needing milk but go on to solid food. Hebrews 5:14 is a concise summary of the process of growth: “But solid food is for the mature who, because of practice, have their sense trained to discern good and evil.” Wise powerful prophetic proclamation is a responsibility of those who are part of the “royal priesthood.”

### **4. Agents of Reconciliation**

We must mediate Christ’s love into a dark and troubled world. Just as priests are agents of reconciliation to God and others, so are we to be such mediators. 1 Timothy 2:1 says that believers should offer prayers, supplications, and intercessions for all men, particularly for rulers. We should pray, in other words, not only for the Church but for the state. The Apostle Paul was called to proclaim Christ to Gentiles, Jews, and kings. Ananias prophesied that Christ “is a chosen instrument of mind, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.”<sup>15</sup> Clearly, the prayers and proclamations are to influence the highest levels of our nation.

God is the one who initiates the process of reconciliation: “All this is from God, who has reconciled himself through Christ, and has given us a ministry of reconciliation.”<sup>16</sup> William Temple wrote, “All is of God; the only thing of my very own which I contribute to my redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed.”<sup>17</sup> Christ is the one who carries out the task of reconciliation. We are reconciled “through Christ” and “in Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

Because of what God has done in Christ, we are given a task. We now have a ministry of reconciliation” we are entrusted with the “message of reconciliation;” we are “ambassadors for

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<sup>13</sup> 1 Peter 2:9.

<sup>14</sup> John 16:8.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 9:15.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Cor. 5:18.

<sup>17</sup> William Temple, quoted in John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 197.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Cor. 5:18-19.

Christ” with the new message, “be reconciled to God.”<sup>19</sup> Christians have a new title as “ambassador,” or “priest,” so that they might have the status to carry a message. Christians are to use this status to minister to others in a way that leads people in the Church and in the world to be reconciled to God and to each other. Unless Christians were appointed, chosen, or ordained to this role of ambassador or priest, we might be reluctant to take the responsibility that is ours.

## Conclusion

The priesthood of all believers has been the most neglected central teaching of the Reformation. It is one thing to say that we are a “chosen race,” a “holy nation,” a “royal priesthood,” and an “ambassador of Christ.” Yet it is another thing altogether to have our identities shaped by these truths so that we act accordingly. If we recover the notion of the “priesthood of all believers” we will pray more boldly, offer up spiritual sacrifices regularly, and realize our unique privilege in Christ.

If we recover our identities as full-time followers of Christ, regardless of where we work, we will be willing to prophetically confront the problems in the Church and in the world. We will be able to live our faith both through our direct participation in the Church, through our professions, and through our engagement in work and society. We will be agents of reconciliation, ambassadors, and mediators; in other words, we will be “priests” in our society. Luther’s hope that “priest” becomes as common a self-designation as “Christian” may never be realized unless Christians work to appropriate this truth so that it becomes part of their lives and identity.

Can we see our work in the world as a priestly act, as part of a royal priesthood? Can Christians use their professions to serve those around them? The notion that all believers are priests can revolutionize the Christian’s work in the Church and in the world, encouraging believers to serve the Lord in whatever capacity or profession they find themselves. With this ministry-oriented mindset toward all areas of life, God’s followers can come boldly into his presence, praying for fruitfulness in their own professions, being prophetic about things they see that are unjust, and acting as agents of reconciliation in their offices, schools, and community.

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<sup>19</sup> 2 Cor. 5:20.