

# **The Priesthood Of All Believers And The Ministry**

*by John F. Brug*

What is the priesthood of all believers? How does this priesthood relate to the public ministries of the Old and New Testaments? How do various forms of service or ministry performed by lay people relate to the priesthood of believers and to the public ministry? Is the public ministry derived from the priesthood of all believers? These and other questions about the priesthood of all believers form a significant side issue in the current debate about “ministry” in American Lutheranism.

This article, which is part of the *Quarterly’s* current series on the doctrine of the ministry, is not intended to be a comprehensive discussion of the priesthood of all believers. It has the limited goal of focusing on a few points which have created some confusion during the ongoing discussion of the doctrine of ministry.

We will examine a few significant truths about the priesthood of all believers which are set forth in 1 Peter 2:4-10 and clarified by other passages of Scripture. This brief overview will enable us to make a few observations about the relationship between the service rendered by the priesthood of all believers and that rendered by the called public ministry of the church.

The most comprehensive presentation of the priesthood of believers is 1 Peter 2:4-10:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame. “ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone, and “A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

## **The Origins Of The Priesthood Of Believers**

When we come to Christ, the living Stone, we, like living stones, are built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:4,5). The universal priesthood was established by Christ. A person becomes a priest in this order when he or she comes to faith in Christ. When we have been born again through the living and enduring word of God (1 Peter 1:23), we become priests and kings with Christ.

Christ, who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father (Revelation 1:5-6). Only those who are holy

can serve as priests in the presence of a holy God. Jesus made us priests by paying the full price of all of our sins on the cross. Washed clean of our sins, we have access to God and can come before him as holy priests who offer acceptable spiritual sacrifices. “Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (Romans 5:1-2)

This status as priests comes automatically to everyone who has faith in Christ, but it does not come to all people. Although Christ has won salvation for all people, only those who believe in him will enjoy the blessings of that salvation. To those who do not believe, Christ is a stone that causes them to stumble and a rock that makes them fall (1 Peter 2:8). For this reason “the priesthood of all believers” is a more apt name for this office than the often-used “universal priesthood.”

Although the priesthood of all believers rests entirely on the work of Christ, the priesthood of all believers is not unique to the New Testament era. This priesthood existed already during the Old Testament era simultaneously with, and even prior to, the levitical priesthood.

The terms which Peter uses to describe the priesthood of believers are titles given to the whole people of Israel at Mount Sinai. “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6).

But this priesthood was not established at Sinai. It was already being practiced by the patriarchs before the establishment of the levitical priesthood. Before the establishment of the Aaronic priesthood, the sacrifices to the true God were offered within the family. “Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it” (Genesis 8:20). “Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the LORD” (Genesis 13:18).

The priesthood of believers began when God gave the first gospel promise to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:15). This priesthood was practiced whenever sacrifices were offered within the family of Adam. The first mention of the exercise of this priesthood beyond the confines of the family is found in Genesis 4:26. “Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began to call on (or proclaim) the name of the (Genesis 4:26). Enoch and Noah were among the preachers of the gospel who exercised this priesthood beyond the boundaries of their own family (Jude 14, 2 Peter 2:5).

After God had set Israel apart as his chosen people, the priesthood of believers existed almost entirely within the boundaries of Israel. The Old Testament prophets, however, foretold that this priesthood would be spread throughout the nations when the Messiah came.

“My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,” says the LORD Almighty (Malachi 1:11).

“They will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD—on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels,” says the LORD. “They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the LORD in ceremonially clean vessels. And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites,” says the LORD (Isaiah 66:20-21).

The New Testament priesthood of believers, therefore, is not an offshoot, successor, or replacement of the levitical priesthood, but a continuation of the priesthood of believers which came into existence when God first gave the gospel and which will continue until Christ returns.

The levitical priesthood, in so far as it was a form of public ministry for its day, finds its successor, not in the priesthood of all believers, but in the public ministry of the church. The unique duties of the levitical priesthood, such as offering sacrifices for sin, find their fulfillment neither in the New Testament priesthood of believers, nor in the public ministry of the church, but in the unique, once-for-all priesthood of Christ.

### **The Description Of This Priesthood**

The honorable names and attributes of this priesthood are the same in the Old Testament and in the New.

### **A Chosen Nation A People Belonging To God**

Both the people of Israel and believers are called “a chosen nation” (*genos eklekton*), and “a people belonging to God” (*laos eis perioiesin*) You are a people (am) holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession (*l'am sigulah*) (Deuteronomy 7:6).

I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, (*ami bichiri*) the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise (Isaiah 43:20-21).

Listen, O Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen (Isaiah 44:1).

“They will be mine,” says the LORD Almighty, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession (*sigulah*). I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him” (Malachi 3:17).

Remember the congregation you purchased of old, the tribe you redeemed as your inheritance (Psalms 74:2).

Christians are a chosen people because God has elected us in Christ and bought us with his blood. Those who were not a people have been formed into one people by Christ (1 Peter 2:10, Hosea 1:9-2:1).

He chose us (*exelekto*) in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:4-5).

Christ gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own (*laon periousion*), eager to do what is good (Titus 2:14).

You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought (*peripoiesato*) with his own blood (Acts 20:28).

### **A Holy Priesthood**

This people, this priesthood which belongs to God is holy. It is cleansed from sin. It is set apart to serve him.

We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Hebrews 10:10).

Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood (Hebrews 13:12).

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Colossians 3:12).

### **God's House Of Living Stones**

Although we are God's priests, we are also the temple of God, a spiritual house. Christ is the cornerstone, his Word given through the apostles and prophets is the foundation, and we are the living stones.

Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house (*oikos*), if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast (Hebrews 3:6).

Since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:21-22).

You will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15).

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building (*oikodome*) is joined together and rises to become a holy temple (*naos*) in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling (*kataoiktepion*) in which God lives by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

### **The Privileges And Duties Of This Priesthood**

#### **Access to God**

The greatest privilege of this priesthood is access to God. We need no mediator other than Christ himself.

Through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit (Ephesians 2:18).

#### **Prayer**

Access to God the Father gives us the privilege of prayer. Royal priests exercise their priesthood every time they pray for themselves and for others.

May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice (Psalms 141:2).

Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne (Revelation 8:3).

#### **Forgiveness Of Sins**

We practice our priesthood every time we come before God as repentant sinners, seeking forgiveness.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalms 51:17).

### **Offering Sacrifices**

Because Christ has offered the once-for-all sacrifice for sin, New Testament priests offer no sin offerings. We offer only spiritual sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. We do this as we live our whole life for Christ. Priestly service is not limited to the use of the means of grace and prayer. It encompasses the whole life of the Christian.

I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:1-2).

This priesthood praises God through its members' words and by their deeds.

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased (Hebrews 13:15-16).

We practice our priesthood when we give our offerings.

I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God (Philippians 4:18).

The priesthood of all believers is both a status and an activity. We become priests when we are reborn through the gospel. We enjoy forgiveness of sins and access to the Father at all times. Everything we do as Christians is an exercise of our priesthood, whether it is “spiritual” or “secular.” We are priests who show forth the praises of God both when we share the gospel with others and when we let our good works shine to the glory of God. Worship, conducting home devotions, teaching our children, sharing the gospel with our neighbors, admonishing and forgiving fellow Christians, calling pastors and teachers, and making judgments concerning doctrine and adiaphora are just some of the many privileges of the priesthood of believers. Christians may fully exercise their priesthood without ever holding an office or a formal position in the church.

### **The Priesthood And The Called Ministry**

Christ established one ministry in the church, that is, he gave the church one mission, to preach the gospel to every creature. This one ministry may be exercised privately by any Christian or publicly by those who have been called by the church to do so.

All Christians may exercise this gospel ministry privately in their daily affairs. They do this whenever they use God's law to condemn sin and his gospel to proclaim forgiveness. Such personal or private ministry is theirs as part of the priesthood of all believers. As we have seen above, however, such private gospel ministry is not the whole of the priesthood of all believers, but only a part of it.

Only those who are qualified and who are called by the church may exercise this gospel ministry publicly, that is, in the name of the church. Such public or representative ministry is practiced by the full-time called workers of the church, such as pastors, teachers, professors, and missionaries. Such public ministry may also be practiced on a part-time, voluntary basis by

Sunday School teachers, evangelism callers, and the like. We sometimes call this service “member ministry” to distinguish it from the service of those who have been called to make the public ministry of the Word their life’s work.

When members of the church are trained and called to serve in certain positions of ministry within the congregation, this is not an exercise of the priesthood of believers. These positions are additional forms of the public ministry of the church.

The called public ministry of the Word was kept distinct from the priesthood of all believers in both the Old and New Testaments. The public ministry in the Old Testament occurred in three main forms, prophet, priest, and Levite.

The prophets were called directly by God to deliver his revelation to the people of Israel. Their call was often for life, but in some cases, such as that of Amos, it may have been temporary.

The priests offered sacrifices and interceded for the people. Some priests were also prophets or teachers. God called the priests through their descent from the families whom he had appointed to be his priests.

The ministry of the Levites was divided into different forms of ministry. Various Levites served as altar assistants, lectors, musicians, judges, secretaries, scribes, custodians of the Temple property, tax collectors for the Temple, and temple security forces. God called men to the levitical ministry through their descent, but the high priest and the king had some discretion in determining the specific forms of ministry and the specific assignments of the Levites. When circumstances changed, as they did when the worship of Israel passed from the Tabernacle to the Temple, new forms of levitical service arose and old ones passed away.

Various forms of public ministry also existed during the days of the apostles. These offices will be discussed more fully in a forthcoming article in this series.

The fact that all Israelites were priests and kings before God did not give them the right to usurp the duties of the public ministry or of a specific form of public ministry to which they had not been called. Miriam used her spiritual gifts as an excuse to claim a role in a public ministry to which God had not called her (Numbers 12). Certain Levites and Reubenites set themselves against the ministry of Moses and Aaron with the claim, “The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord’s assembly?” (Numbers 16:3). In both cases their presumptuous usurpation of a public ministry to which they had not been called was severely punished by God.

During the New Testament era the priesthood of believers does not give individual Christians the right to assume duties of the public ministry any more than it did during Old Testament times. It is still the call which distinguishes the public ministry from the priesthood of all believers. Christians may assume only those functions of the public ministry to which they have been called.

Both the priesthood of all believers and the public ministry originate in the call of Christ. Christ calls all Christians to the priesthood of believers when he calls them to faith through the gospel. Christ calls some Christians to public ministry through the call of the church.

Some say that the public ministry stems from the priesthood of believers. This is true in the sense that no one can presume to act in the name of other Christians without a call from them to do so. Nevertheless, this way of speaking is apt to be confusing unless it is carefully qualified. Such a way of speaking may leave the impression that the public ministry is an optional arrangement, dependent on the whim of the church. The public ministry, however, is a divine

institution established by Christ. He has, however, given the church considerable freedom in determining the forms in which that ministry is arranged.

The opposite misconception about the origin of the public ministry derives the office of the pastor directly from office of the apostles. This error downplays or, in extreme cases, even eliminates the role of the congregation of believers in the establishing of the public ministry in a particular place.

“From Christ through the church” states the derivation of the public ministry in the least confusing way and guards against errors at both ends of the spectrum.

Like Luther we must always guard ourselves on two fronts whenever we speak of the relationship of the priesthood of believers and the public ministry. On the one hand we must speak highly of the rights and royal status of the priesthood of all believers in order to guard against every form of hierarchicalism which makes the people of Christ subservient to the clergy. On the other hand we must also speak highly of the called public ministry in order to guard against disrespect for it and usurpation of its duties. To lay people who jealously covet the privileges of the called public ministry we must say, “Isn’t it enough for you that God has made you his royal priest?” (Compare Numbers 16:8-11). To called workers who would jealously deny God’s royal priests the opportunity to serve we must say, “I wish all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them” (Compare Numbers 11:26-29).

Both the priesthood of all believers and the public ministry are forms of service established by God. Each of us should cherish that form of service to which God has called us, whatever it may be. We must guard our hearts against jealousy which begrudges to others the office to which God has called them. We should be thankful for the service which the Lord provides to us, to his church, and to the world through the priesthood of believers and through the public ministry. The good health of the body of Christ requires that both the priesthood of all believers and the public ministry faithfully carry out the various duties which the Lord has given to them. Each of us should boldly exercise the office which God has given to us and encourage our brothers and sisters in the faith to do likewise.

### **Further Reading**

Wilbert Gawrisch, “A Royal Priesthood, Proclaiming God’s Praise, *WLQ*, Vol. 75, October, 1978, p 270-291.

Armin Schuetze, “The Significance of the Reformation for Ministry Today, *WLQ*, Vol. 83, Spring 1986, p 116-127.

Thomas Winger, “We are all Priests: a Contextual Study of the Priesthood in Luther,” *Lutheran Theological Quarterly*, IV 2, Fall-Winter 1992, p 129-156.

L.W. Spitz, “The Universal Priesthood of Believers,” *The Abiding Word*, Vol I, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958, p 321-341.

John Schaller, “The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry,” *WLQ*, Vol 78, January, 1991, p 30-51.