

The Priesthood of <ALL> Believers

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In a passage that deserves more attention than we seem to have granted it, the apostle Peter writes:

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in him will not be put to shame." To you therefore who believe, he is precious, but for those who do not believe, "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner," and "A stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall"; for they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy (1 Pet 2:4-10, RSV).

In these verses, Peter's own statement (vv. 4-5) is followed in vv. 6-8 by the quotation of three Old Testament texts (Isa 26:16; Ps 118:22; Isa 8:14, 15) mingled with a few explanatory comments. In vv. 9 and 10 Peter uses three additional texts (Isa 43: 20, 21; Exod 19:6; Hos 2:25), not quoted as directly as the first Old Testament references.

In his remarks on the nature of the church the apostle uses imagery common to early Christian believers: for instance, Jesus as the stone, cornerstone, and stone of stumbling, as well as members of the Christian community as stones forming a building. These were concepts commonly accepted in early Christianity (cf. Eph 2:19, 20; Rom 9:33; Mark 12:10, 11; Eph 2:20-22). The same is true of Jesus as rejected (Mark 8:31; Luke 17:25), and Jesus as elect (cf. Luke 9:35; 23:35). House, building and temple are terms commonly applied to the church in the New Testament (Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 3:9, 16-17; 1 Tim 3:15). So are the idea of sacrifices acceptable to God (Rom 12:1; 15:16; Heb 13:15,16) and the concept of those who were not a people becoming God's people (Rom 9:25; 11:17-24).

In 1 Pet 2:4-10, the apostle is moving in a circle of ideas that were shared among early Christians. Its center was faith in Christ and the concept of the church as the continuation of Israel. His was not an isolated stance, but reflected a common perspective of major significance.

In the conclusion of his argumentation (vv. 9 and 10) Peter carefully set forth the affirmation that Christians are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people," that they may declare the wonderful deeds of God who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light. In these verses one finds the Old Testament concept of priesthood merged with part of Exod 19:5, 6: "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

This review of Peter's statement on the priesthood of all believers, however brief, will follow several steps. We shall first seek to bring together the basic elements of the Aaronic-Levitical priesthood. We will then inquire about the basis of Jesus' high priesthood as continuation and fulfillment of the Levitical priestly model. That will be followed by an examination of the New Testament concept that all born-again believers belong to the priesthood intended by God, its basic implications, and some of its most striking misunderstandings. Finally, we shall sketch a few words of conclusion, emphasizing the practical purpose of the biblical doctrine.

The Levitical Priesthood

At the heart of Old Testament religion was relationship with God. In Israel, the covenant, the temple, worship, and every facet of life were as many expressions of this relationship. Prophets and priests were the guardians and servants of this life of relationship. Their functions can best be understood in that context.⁽¹⁾

Of Aaron, Priests, and Levites

While after the Sinai covenant some non-Levites performed priestly functions on occasion, as for instance Gideon (Judg 6:24-26), Manoah of Dan (Judg 13:19), Samuel (1 Sam 7:9), David (2 Sam 6:13-17), and Elijah (1 Kgs 18:23, 37-38), the office of priesthood was vested in the tribe of Levi.⁽²⁾ All priests were Levites, but by no means were all Levites priests. The priesthood itself was restricted to the family of Aaron and his descendants (Exod 28:1, 41, 43; Num 3:10). They undertook the sacrificial duties. Aaron himself was "the priest who is chief among his brethren" (Lev 21:10), thus fulfilling an office described as that of "high priest" (Num 35:25, 28; Josh 20:6), "the priest" (Exod 31:10), or "the anointed priest" (Lev 4:3, 5, 16). Like that of the other priests, his office was hereditary and passed on to his eldest son (Num 3:32, 20:28; 25:10-13). The high priest bore the names of all the tribes of Israel on his breastplate into the sanctuary thus representing all the people before God (Exod 28:19). While his duties were similar in principle to those of the other priests, he had certain exclusive responsibilities, the clearest of which was his ministry on the annual Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). To the Levites, whom he had assigned "as a gift to Aaron and his sons" (Num 8:19), God committed the supervision of the minor duties of the tabernacle (Num 1:50; 3:28, 32, 8:15, 31). They helped the priests (Num 3:6, 8; 18:2) and served the congregation in various capacities (Num 16:9; 8:19).

A Priest-People, A Kingdom of Priests

The high priest, the priests, and the Levites, all descending from Levi, represented the nation's relationship with God. They took the place of the first-born who belonged by right to God (Exod 13:1-2, 13; Num 3:12-13, 45), apparently reflecting God's original desire that his whole people should be a priestly people, a "kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:4-6; cf. Num 15:40). With the establishment of the theocracy at Sinai and the erection of the tabernacle, due to the failure of his people at the time of the golden calf apostasy (Exod 32:26-29; Deut 33:8-11), God appointed the tribe of Levi to its service instead of the first-born (Num 3:5-13; 8:14-19). In the background, however, the vision of the priest-people remained, waiting to become the "priesthood of all believers" under the one New Testament High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Basic Priestly Functions and Responsibilities

As noted earlier, at the heart of the Hebrew religion was one's relationship with God, a relationship disrupted by sin. The necessity of maintaining this relationship made the priests and their ministrations immensely important. Theirs was the role of mediators between God and Israel. They attended to the solemn task of approaching God on behalf of the people. Priests did so not because they were innately better or holier than the rest of the nation but because that was the task that God, in his mercy, had entrusted to them. Their functions and responsibilities were evidence of the mercy of God toward his people and of the importance of maintaining an acceptable relationship with God.

The elaborate seven-day consecration ceremony of Aaron and his sons (Exod 29:1-37; Leviticus 8) set the Hebrew priests apart from the people as holy persons, chosen of God, consecrated to God, and representatives of the people before God as well as representatives of God to the people. As representatives of the people they were to offer various acceptable sacrifices and officiate in the prescribed services as instituted by God through Moses. Representing God before Israel, the priest taught the people the law of the Lord (Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10), administered justice (Deut 17:8-13; 19:16, 17), watched over the physical health of the nation (Leviticus 13-15), and judged ritual cleanness (Leviticus 13). Other duties were shared with the Levites in general.

Representing Israel before God, the priests were primarily concerned with ministering at the altar and offering sacrifices (Deut 33:8-10). On the assumption that Israelites were sinners standing in need of a mediator, the essential duty of the priest was to represent Israel to God. This particular function was inherent to the priesthood; the others were additional responsibilities. The New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews emphasizes this Godward aspect of the priesthood as its very essence (Heb 6:20; 7:25; 9:24). This representation of sinners to God was an admission of the sinfulness of the human race, of the holiness of God, and of the need of conditions in one's approach to God. It also carried with it the right of access to God and the possibility of abiding in the presence of God.

Christ Jesus, the Ever-Living High Priest

A Continuation of the Old Testament Priestly Ministry

While early Jewish Christian believers continued to praise God in the temple at Jerusalem (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 21:27; 22:17), their understanding of the priesthood had undergone a radical change. The gospel they received and proclaimed had led them to understand that in Christ Jesus God had provided an ever-living Mediator. His life and death on the cross had an expiatory dimension. What in the past had been undertaken by priests and Levites on a continuous basis had now been fully achieved once for all in Jesus Christ, whose priesthood was seen as a continuation of the Old Testament priestly ministry. The priesthood of the Levites and of Christ were knit together as preparation with fulfillment, as provisional with ideal (Heb 8:5; 9:23-28). In the Epistle to the Hebrews one finds the application to Christ of the terms "priest" and "high priest."⁽³⁾ Although Christ's priestly and mediatorial functions connected with sacrifice and intercession pervade the whole New Testament (Matt 20:28; John 1:29; Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 5:7; Eph 2:13-14, 18; 1 Pet 1:18, 19), in Hebrews the priesthood of Christ finds its fullest expression.

Redeemer and Priest

One may wonder why Christ's priesthood is so strongly brought forward in the Epistle to the Hebrews. It seems that its author was concerned about the spiritual degeneration (5:11-4), and backsliding, if not apostasy (6:1-9; 10:35), of its intended readers. A personal experience of the priesthood of Christ would bring back spiritual steadfastness, growth, and assurance. These Hebrew Christians knew Jesus as Savior and had an elementary knowledge of the truths of redemption (6:1) but may not have realized what it meant to have Christ as Priest. The distinction between the two is not without importance.

Centuries earlier the Levitical priesthood was established at Sinai *after* the redemption of God's people from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. At Sinai Israel should have realized that God had brought them to himself (Exod 19:4) and that, beyond deliverance, their true relation to God and God's relation to them was his dwelling among them (Exod 19:4-6; 25:1-8). The priesthood was appointed to provide the means of access to God, without fear, on the basis of an already-existing redemption.

Likewise, Hebrew Christians knew Christ as Redeemer. They were now to discern the possibility, the power, and the joy of constant and free access to God through Christ, in full assurance and without fear (Heb 4:14-16). There is indeed a major difference between knowing Christ as Savior and as Priest. This is one of the central distinctions between the teachings of Romans and Hebrews. While Romans is concerned with redemption which makes access to God possible (Rom 5:1, 2), Hebrews is concerned with access made possible by redemption. The epistle's constant appeal is to "draw near" (Heb 10:22), not to "shrink back" (10:39) but to "go on" (6:1).

Christ's Qualifications

To the question, "What is it, exactly, that constitutes the representative character of Christ's priesthood"? or "Why did God appoint Christ and no other"? the Epistle to the Hebrews submits several answers. To begin, the priesthood of Christ is a continuation and fulfillment of the Old Testament priestly ministry. This is the basis of Christ's priestly qualifications. The epistle explains that Christ has been appointed by God (Heb 5:5-10) "to act on behalf of men in relation to God" (5:1). His perfect humanity involves oneness with men and women for whom he acts, having undergone, as they do, the discipline of suffering and temptation (Heb 2:9, 14-18; 4:15). In personal character Christ was holy and guileless (Heb 7:26, 27; cf. 1 Pet 3:18), thus having no need to be purged of sin as did the sons of Aaron (Heb 7:28) who had to offer sacrifices for themselves as well as for God's children (Heb 5:2, 3; 7:27, 28; 9:7). Being subject to death, Old Testament priests could not continue their ministry forever, but Jesus is sinless, a perfect and eternal High Priest (Heb 4:15; 5:7-10; 7:23-28; 9:14) who can fully "sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb 2:14-18; 4:15).⁽⁴⁾

In contrast to the imperfect sanctuary of the old covenant (Heb 9:1-5) with its repeated rituals (Heb 9:6-10) "which cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper" (Heb 9:9; cf. 10:4), Christ, who paradoxically is both Priest and offering (Heb 9:11, 14, 26), entered the "greater and more perfect tent" (Heb 9:11) of which Moses' tabernacle was but "a copy and shadow" (Heb 8:1-7). He took his own blood and became the Mediator of a new and better covenant (Heb 9:11-15), making constant intercession (Heb 7:25). "Symbolic for the present age" (Heb 9:9), the Aaronic way into the sanctuary was standing "until the time of reformation" should come (Heb 9:10).

Christ's Priesthood and Melchizedek's

One of the most remarkable features of the discussion in Hebrews is the association of Christ's priesthood with that of Melchizedek,⁽⁵⁾ a priesthood that not only surpasses that of Aaron's (Heb 7:11) but reaches back to the days of Abraham. Melchizedek is mentioned three times in the Scriptures and each time the reference is of particular significance. In Genesis 14 he appears in history in connection with Abraham and is called "priest of God Most High" (v. 18). In Psalm 110 he is mentioned in a psalm generally regarded as Messianic, which Christ applied to himself (Matt 22:44). He appears a third time in Hebrews, which not only takes the Genesis 14 account as it stands, but uses it to typify some of the aspects of the priesthood of Christ.

God had promised that the Messianic king would also be "a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps 110:4). Such a promise suggested the imperfections of the Aaronic order (Heb 7:11-14). The mere assertion of another priesthood at all is rather striking. Besides, the position of Melchizedek as king indicates the *royalty* of Christ's priesthood. The fact that in Genesis 14 Melchizedek "has neither beginning of days nor end of life" is used in Hebrews to typify the perpetuity of Christ's priesthood, unbroken by genealogical beginning or end (Heb 7:3; cf. 7:15-19). Melchizedek's order is also superior to Aaron's since Levi, in Abraham's loins, paid tithe to the king of Salem, the lesser to the greater (Heb 7:4-10). The priesthood exercised by Christ is unquestionably greater than that exercised by the Aaronic-Levitical priests.

The fundamental use of the Melchizedek's priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews has to do with the person of the priest-king rather than with his functions and responsibilities. The priestly person rather than the priestly work is underlined in the Melchizedek priesthood. Unlike Aaron, Melchizedek was a *royal* person, an *abiding* person and a *unique* person. The personal superiority of Melchizedek in these areas over the priesthood of Aaron is emphasized in Hebrews. No comparison is being drawn between Melchizedek and Christ, but Melchizedek is used to symbolize, to typify the personal superiority of Christ over all other priests, of his priesthood over that of Aaron. Christ's priesthood is inherent in his person as Son of God. First and foremost, it is this uniqueness as Son of God that gives Christ his qualifications for priesthood.

Christ's Priestly Functions

Since no characteristic priestly functions are recorded for Melchizedek, it was necessary to denote Christ's priestly functions in connection with those of Aaron. The contrast is shown, among other things, by the recurring word "better" (Heb 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:23). The essence of the Levitical priesthood is representative offering. "Every high priest chosen from among men," writes the author of Hebrews, "is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer sacrifices for sins" (5:1). This is the essence of priesthood. The priest exercises his priesthood by making an offering to God (Heb 8:3). Having offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin (Heb 7:27), Christ presents his blood within the veil (Heb 6:20; 8:3 9:7, 24) after the daily and annual patterns of the Aaronic priesthood. By virtue of his sacrifice on the cross Christ has become "the mediator of a new [or "better"] covenant" (Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24), its "surety" or guarantee (Heb 7:22), and carries on his present work as Priest. As paradoxical as it may seem, Christ is set forth as offering and priest at the same time (Heb 9:14, 26, cf. 7:27).

As representative of the people in their approach to God, one of the high priest's tasks was to intercede. This aspect of Christ's ministry is explicitly set forth in the epistle (Heb 7:25, 26; 2:17, 18; 4:15, 16; cf. Rom 8:34). To Christ's function as Mediator and Intercessor, the epistle adds the work of sanctification (Heb 2:11; 10:10, 14; 13:12), once more connecting this aspect of his priestly ministry with his death on the cross. He did not merely make an offering once for all on the basis of which sinners may come to God, Christ also pursues a sanctifying work in his people. All these functions are part of the present activity of our High Priest.⁽⁶⁾

In the context of his priestly ministry Hebrews refers to Christ's second coming. He appeared "once for all" to put away sin by his death on the cross (Heb 9:26) and "to bear the sins of many" (v. 28), but "will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (v. 28). Christ's high-priestly ministry will go on "for ever" (Heb 7:24) till it be completed when he comes again.

The Priesthood of Believers

One more major dimension to the biblical concept of priesthood needs to be addressed. This is the New Testament concept that all born-again Christians belong to the priesthood. This teaching is often referred to as the priesthood of all believers.

The Testimony of Scripture

One may identify five specific New Testament references to the priesthood of believers. Three are found in the Book of Revelation which speaks of Christ who "made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (Rev 1:5,6), "a kingdom and priests to our God" (Rev 5:10), and of the redeemed who "shall be priests of God and of Christ" (Rev 20:6). Best known is Peter's statement exhorting fellow Christians to come to Christ "to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:4, 5), followed by his conclusion: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (v.9).

Baptism, the Sign of Our Universal Call

Risen from the dead and ascended on high, our High Priest is engaged in continuous intercession, so that day by day his presence, power, and prayer are made available to us. More than that, he has "made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father," as we just noted. Buried with Christ in baptism, we have also been raised together with him through faith (Col 2:12; 3:1; cf. Rom 6:1-4). Through repentance and faith we have been admitted to God's covenant of grace and have been made participants in the priestly ministry of Christ, our Lord. Baptism is the anointing and consecration of every born-again believer as priest of Christ. It is the sign of our universal call. It signifies a new identity. Ellen White concurs.⁽⁷⁾

By virtue of our union with Christ we partake of a priesthood that is derived from his. His priestly standing before God is imputed to every Christian believer. By calling us "priests unto God,"⁽⁸⁾ not only does John remind us that Jesus Christ is Mediator of the new and better covenant, but also that we, as a priestly, sacrificial body, are enlisted in a royal ministry through which Christ wants to redeem the world. The two titles, king and priest, place upon us a high calling and serious obligations, a commitment to the priestly work of Christ.

Offering Spiritual Sacrifices

What does God expect from those who lay claim on the scriptural doctrine of the priesthood of believers?⁽⁹⁾ To do the true work of priests. The concrete content of this mandate is most impressively set forth by Peter. To begin with, as "a holy priesthood," we are "to offer spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5).

Peter does not specify the content of these "spiritual sacrifices," but the context suggests that one's manner of life is in mind, as is stressed throughout the epistle (1 Pet 1:15-18; 2:12, 14-15, 20; 3:1-2, 6, 17; 4:19). Elsewhere in the New Testament the nature of these

sacrifices is more specifically spelled out. The sacrifices of Christians include their praises and confessions of Christ's name: "Through him [Christ] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Heb 13:15). No longer the fruit of crops or the offsprings of animals, but "the fruit of lips." Next, deeds of charity and fellowship performed by Christians are sacrifices in which God delights: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Heb 13:16). The same is true of material gifts and offerings which, for instance, Paul received from the Philippians by the hand of Epaphroditus and describes as "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (Phil 4:18).

Paul adopts an image from sacrificial rituals to describe his own self-giving in the work of ministry. One may see here an allusion to the prospect of his martyrdom: "Even if I am to be poured out as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all" (Phil 2:17). Then, the converts made by the missionary efforts of the church are regarded as a sacrifice offered to God and part of the priestly work (Rom 15:16). The early church considered converted Gentiles as the "first fruits" of the harvest of the world, gathered at Christ's request (Rev 14:4).

Paul probably reaches the high point of the Christian concept of sacrifice when he exhorts Roman believers to present their "bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God," their "spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1). The bodies of Christians are "members of Christ" (1 Cor 6:15), temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). Because they are at every moment presented to God in Christ, Christians must endeavor to be what they already are by faith: holy, pure, without blemish. This sacrificial living is achieved through the power of Christ's resurrection and heavenly intercession.

The Missionary Obligation

Believer priests are not only called to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, they are also to "declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9).

According to Exod 19:5,6, which is at the root of Peter's statement, the sons and daughters of Israel were to be priests to God because of all nations he had chosen them for a special mission of service. They were called to offer to God the sacrifice of worship and obedience which the nations around them would not render, and to offer to the world the witness of grace God wanted to display through them. Their vocation was that of a priestly people, chosen and set apart for devotion to God and for the task of bringing God to all nations (cf. Gen 12:3; Isa 49:6; 53:3-5; 56:6-8; Gal 3:8). "If you will obey my will and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine" was God's appeal to Israel through Moses (Exod 19:5; cf. v.3).

God had elected Israel not because he had no interest in the other nations but precisely because of his concern for "all the earth." Israel as a nation had been set apart as a priesthood with a mediatorial work vis-à-vis God and the world. It was a priesthood

pointing forward to the coming Priest, Prophet, and King Messiah. Peter clearly calls the Christian believers—those who had received mercy and been made a "royal priesthood, a holy nation"—to proclaim that the "stone which the builders rejected" had "become the head of the corner" (1 Pet 2:7-10, quoting Ps 118:22). God has thus called the Christian church, as heir of the commission originally given to the Jewish nation, to represent him to all nations and the needs of all nations to God.

So this is what Christians are: a kingdom of priests. This is not an honorific title bestowed to boost our self-esteem, nor is it a regal claim to privilege. As Israel of old, besides offering our sacrifices to God, we are to be witnesses of his presence, reminders of his grace, unfolding God's loving presence in the world through lives shaped by his grace. As believer priests, a missionary obligation is placed on all of us. We are to introduce those we encounter to the nearness of God. We can no longer isolate ourselves from the sins and woes and cares of the world in which we live. We are to see our priesthood in the light of Christ's. As he was sent into the world to fulfill a priestly mission for sinners so also are his believer priests commissioned to fulfill the mission entrusted to them. He conceived of his mission in terms of service (Mark 10:45) and taught his disciples that they also were servants (Matt 10:24, 25; John 15:20): servants of the Servant of God, offering to all nations and peoples redemption through Christ's death on the cross and priestly ministry in heaven (Eph 1:7; Heb 9:15, 11-12).

It remains possible for us, however, to receive everything from God and still be the means of impeding his redemptive activity in the world. We need to guard against the temptation to selfishness and to be satisfied with spending our time talking to ourselves. We are not called to be priests to ourselves or to go to the altar alone.

A Corporate Priesthood

The priesthood about which the New Testament speaks is a corporate priesthood, a priesthood of the whole Christian church. Though spiritual gifts are granted individually to born-again Christians (1 Cor 12:4-11; 1 Pet 4:10), the priesthood is viewed in a collective sense as belonging to the whole body of believers. In every instance, whether in 1 Peter or Revelation, the words "priest" and "priesthood" are used collectively. The community of Christian believers, not just the individuals, is priestly. This is particularly plain in 1 Pet 2: 5 and 9 where the apostle uses "a body of priests (*hierateuma*)," in parallel with "a spiritual house," "a chosen race," and "God's people."

Thus, all members of the church have both an individual and a corporate responsibility. The full intention of priesthood, its ultimate meaning, is negated if priesthood is perceived only in individualistic terms—*my* access to God, *my* intercessory ministry, *my* right to interpret God's word. The church is a fellowship of believer priests, of gifted believer priests, who all have received from the Holy Spirit spiritual gifts for the good of the church as a whole (1 Cor 12:7; 1 Pet 4:10). Corporately, the church is the sacrificing priesthood instituted by God Himself so that men and women around the world may learn about God, have access to Him, and in turn offer spiritual sacrifices.

Of Misunderstandings and Abuses

Unlikely Callings

Since the gifts of the Spirit are granted to all Christian believers, each has a definite ministry, a priesthood, to fulfill. All have equal access to God. All may "with confidence draw near to the throne of grace" (Heb 4:16). All may "enter the sanctuary" and "draw near to God" (Heb 10: 19-22). All, according to their measure, share the priesthood of the ascended Christ from whom the church derives its character as a royal priesthood.

This intimation of equality that we are all priests demands that we take seriously the call of God to each believer priest. It requires that we take seriously some unlikely callings. Some whom God calls may have few of the traditional qualifications of respectability. Some may speak the wrong language or have the wrong skin color or be of the wrong gender.

Ordained Believer Priests

At the same time, the priesthood of believers does not imply that the church leaves no room for a separated ministry. While no priesthood existed belonging to a particular order of believers, the New Testament church recognized that in the exercise of its corporate life and responsibilities, special qualifications were required for the discharge of special duties and thus acknowledged the principle of representative selection.

Every born-again Christian is called to and capable of ministry. A "lay member" in the New Testament sense is a member of the *laos theou*, or "people of God" (Heb 4:9; cf. 1 Pet 2:9; Acts 15:14; Tit 2:14), is certainly not a church member who has no priestly responsibility, one who has handed over his or her functions of pastoral care or evangelism to certain professional believers who have been ordained and are paid to perform them. All the "laity," members of the *laos theou*, when we use the term in the biblical way, are priests and ministers in the church, and all those we today call "ministers" are equally "lay people."

Yet as priests of God and because they are priests, the Spirit calls some to specific ministries, including positions of leadership or oversight among God's people. Some are called and set aside, ordained to the sole occupation of stewards in the household of God and shepherds of his flock. They are gifts of God to the church. They are believer priests chosen by God and recognized by the church as endowed with the appropriate gifts for leading God's people in fulfilling the commission entrusted to the whole body (Eph 4:11-16). They hold no priesthood different in kind from that which is common to the Lord's people. These ordained believer priests are not placed above the body of Christ, but in it, in the fellowship of all believer priests. The difference is one of degree, not of kind.

Calling for an End to Ordination?

Because God welcomes the ministry of all believer priests, some have been calling the church to abolish the practice of ordination and to encourage God's people to function according to the gifts the Spirit has granted them, without regard to office. There is little doubt that in certain respects our current ordination practices have gone beyond what one finds in the Scriptures. Still, the laying on of hands, setting apart of believers, and commissioning them to special ministries is the custom plainly established in the Scriptures.

In the New Testament the laying on of hands is often connected with blessing (Matt 19:13-15), healing (Matt 9:18; Mark 6:5; 7:32; Luke 4:40; Acts 9:13, 17), and the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:16-17; 19:4-7). In the Old Testament it is associated with blessing (Gen 48:8-20) and ordaining or commissioning. Thus Moses set apart Joshua and commissioned him to lead the people of Israel (Num 27:18-23; cf. Deut 34:9). Returning to the New Testament we learn that Jesus "appointed" the Twelve "to be with him, and to be sent out to preach" (Mark 3:13, 14). Luke simply states that he chose them and named them apostles (Luke 6:13). No reference is made here to a particular ceremony.

The seven, in Acts 6:6, were set apart for a specific task by the laying on of hands. Paul and Barnabas, likewise, were commissioned in the same fashion at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3), as was Timothy (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6). The same thing occurred in numerous other early Christian congregations (cf. Acts 14:23). One should add that Paul expected Timothy to ordain others to leadership positions in the church since he exhorts him not to be hasty in the laying on of hands (1 Tim 5:22). This admonition shows that this commissioning, which we usually call "ordination," is always a solemn affair.

From these instances we may infer that ordination-commissioning was practiced by the apostles in the early church, starting with the case of the seven deacons. The essential rite appears to have been the laying on of hands along with prayer. In several instances it is related to specific gifts already granted by the Spirit, and marked by an act of public acknowledgment and commissioning (Acts 6:3-5; 13:3). As set forth in the New Testament it is embedded in the Spirit's universal calling of all believers to participate in the ministry of the whole church. It does not elevate some Christians above others but commissions them to a special ministry for the sake of leading the whole church of God "in the work of ministry" (Eph 4:12). Rather than ending the practice, what may be called for is further reflection on the meaning and role of ordination in the light of the priesthood of all believers.⁽¹⁰⁾

Ordaining Women to Ministry?

In the context of this article one cannot skip the matter of the propriety of ordination of women to special ministries, including the pastoral ministry. Some oppose full participation of women in church leadership on the basis that in the church God calls men to provide leadership or headship and women to assist them, particularly in the areas of worship and shepherding. Ministry in the church is regarded as a priesthood from which women are excluded.⁽¹¹⁾

Males functioned as priests in the days of the biblical patriarchs as well as after God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. With the move from Israel to the Christian church, however, a radical transformation occurred. A new priesthood is unfolded in the New Testament, that of all believers. The Christian church is a fellowship of believer priests. Such an ecclesiology, such an understanding of the nature and mission of the church, no longer poses roadblocks to women serving in any ministry. It in fact demands a partnership of men and women in all expressions of the ordained ministry. The recognition of the priesthood of all believers implies a church in which women and men work side by side in various functions and ministries, endowed with gifts distributed by the Holy Spirit according to his sovereign will (1 Cor 12:7-11).

Did Paul ever indicate that some gifts are bestowed upon men and others upon women? Is there any attempt on his part, or on Peter's, to distinguish between gift and role, between the Spirit gifting and the exercise of ministry by one particular gender? In the Christian church distinctions of race, social position, economic status, and gender are no longer valid considerations in ordering the church's ministry. We are all ministers within Christ's fellowship.

Misplaced Individualism

One more misunderstanding of the priesthood of believers needs to be pointed out. If this New Testament teaching does not imply that the church has no room for a separated ministry, if it does not object to seeing men and women serving side by side in all expressions of the priesthood, neither does it justify the attitude that a Christian may believe whatever he or she may choose and still be considered as a loyal and faithful member of the priesthood. While in their interpretation of the priesthood of all believers the sixteenth-century reformers intended to impress on their contemporaries that each of them could and must go directly to God, one may still wonder if any of them would have expected the kind of defiant individualism so common today.

Peter did not envision solo believers claiming that nobody could tell them what to believe, that "Jesus and I" was all that was needed. He insisted on the priesthood of *all* believers, emphasizing equality, not aloneness. Among early Christian believers, from what the New Testament tells us, it was in communities that the apostolic writings were read and interpreted (cf. Col 4:16). Such writings were usually sent to communities of believers, "to all of God's beloved in Rome" (Rom 1:7), "to the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), "to the churches of Galatia" (Gal 1:2), to the Ephesian "saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus" (Eph 1:1) and to "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi" (Phil 1:1). So was Peter's first epistle addressed "to the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bythinia" (1 Pet 1:1). It was in communities of believers that the ordinances were shared and violations of discipline dealt with (1 Corinthians 10 and 11; 5:1-5; cf. 2 Cor 7:9-12). It was in communities of believer priests that questions were asked and debated (1 Thess 5:19-21; 1 John 4:1), and that Christians rallied to care for each other in times of adversity (Acts 2:45; 4:32-37).

As the body grew and developed, churches united under the leadership first of the apostles then of overseeing elders appointed in every city (Acts 14:23; 20:28; Heb 13:17). While one can immediately observe various stages of spiritual and structural development, certain organizational principles appear basic to the New Testament church. Common customs characterized Christian congregations (1 Cor 11:16). Letters of recommendation were sent from one community to another (Acts 18:24-28). Collections were gathered and sent from one congregation to another in the name of the church (Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8:6-9). In times of discussion and disputation over the content of the Christian faith representatives of churches came together, reached a decision under the guidance of the Spirit, and then shared them "for observance" with the congregations visited by the apostles (cf. Acts 15:1-29; 16:1-5). Churches depended on each other in a bond of unity in the same way that members in a local congregation did.

All believers have a unique and unalienable right of direct access to God. Quickened by his grace, they are fully capable of responding to him directly. Yet priesthood of believers does not mean "I am my own priest; I can believe anything I want to." It means, rather, that as one priest in a community of believer priests I must be alert to keep the body of Christ from drifting from "the faith which was once and for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). It means that in the community of saints God has so tempered the body that we are all priests to each other. Adherence to the truths of Scripture does not violate the priesthood of believers. This universal priesthood does not negate religious liberty, but neither is it a license for doctrinal irresponsibility. There is need for a proper balance between individual responsibility and theological integrity. In the very statement we have been considering (1 Pet 2:4-10) the apostle does not press for religious individualism but for its exact opposite, the reality of the church as a community.

Here is another of the church's delicate tasks. We can err either by drawing the boundaries too tightly or by refusing to draw them at all. It is the role of a proper biblical theology to help both the church and each believer to know the difference.

Conclusion

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is in its fullest sense a biblical doctrine (Exod 19:4-6; 1 Pet 2:4-10). No more than other churches has ours been able to express in its everyday life the richness of this teaching. Its content, indeed, is far richer than what it is usually taken to mean, that as priest, every individual Christian man and woman has, through Christ, direct access to God apart from the office of any human intermediary. The biblical view is much more profound than this. It means fundamentally that as Christ's body and as his new Israel the church is anointed to a priesthood in the world, a mediatorial ministry that declares the will of God "to every nation and tribe and tongue and people," and bears human needs before God's throne in prayer and intercession.

Yet this teaching is not to be confined to a doctrinal formula but must continuously find expression in the active life of the church. It should be decisive and determinative in shaping the course of the Advent Movement in years to come. As such it is a protest

against the use of priesthood exclusively as a call addressed to a few. Nor is it to be limited to a particular race, gender, or social class. Every function of every member of Christ's body is called to be a priesthood, a ministry to be exercised in various spheres of life, whether in the church or in a "secular" context.

The practical purpose of the truth of this biblical doctrine is what must ever be kept in view. It is by means of our personal experience of Christ's heavenly priesthood that as Christians we may come out of spiritual infancy into spiritual maturity (Heb 6:1). This practical character is most clearly seen in the various exhortations in Hebrews having to do with our daily lives: "We have," "therefore let us." Having a great High Priest, let us hold fast (Heb 4:14). Having a sympathizing High Priest, let us draw near God's throne with boldness and confidence (Heb 4:15, 16). Having boldness of access, let us draw near with faith (Hebrews 11), hold fast our hope (Hebrews 12), and consider one another in love (Hebrews 13). Having received a kingdom, let us be grateful and offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe (Heb 12:28). As Jesus suffered, let us go forth to Him, bearing abuse for him (Heb 13:12, 13). Seeking the lasting city, the one that is to come, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God (Heb 13:14, 15). It might be summed up in the exhortation pointed out earlier, "Draw nigh," "Hold fast," "Do not shrink back." We still need a Mediator, Jesus our Lord.

As we realize this privilege of nearness and respond to these exhortations to draw near and keep near, we shall find that element of boldness and confidence (*parresia*), to be one of the essential characteristics of a dedicated Christian life. It is this boldness that the priesthood of Christ is intended to produce and develop in believer priests. This truth of priesthood, both of Christ as taught in Hebrews, and of believers as found in 1 Peter and the Book of Revelation, is essential to a vigorous life, a mature experience, and a joyous testimony.

Endnotes

1. It is not possible in this brief chapter to go into the technical historical and critical questions related to the Old Testament priesthood raised by the Graf-Wellhausen approach to the history of the Levitical system. Working from the basis of an evolutionary view of history, various critical scholars have claimed that the traditional functions of the Old Testament priesthood did not emerge until the days of the monarchy, or even until the close of the seventh-century b.c. The biblical account places the origin of Israel's priesthood in the days of Moses, in connection with ministry in the tabernacle (Exodus 25-40).

2. Priestly functions of sacrifice had been carried on from the earliest patriarchal times by heads of clans. The activities of Noah (Gen 8:20-24), Abraham (Gen 12:7; 13:4, 18; 22:1-13) and Job (Job 1:5) are illustrative of the patriarchal functions of fathers of households. Prior to the Hebrew priesthood established at the time of the Sinai covenant, the Old Testament tells of the priesthood of Melchizedek (Gen 14:18), of the Egyptians (Gen

41:45; 46:20; 47:22, 26), and of the Midianites (Exod 2:16; 3:1, 18:1). The priests mentioned in Exod 19:22, 24 are probably priests in Israel prior to the Levitical priesthood.

3. Though at times Christ is referred to as "priest" in the Epistle to the Hebrews (5:6; 7:11, 15; 8:4), the usual terminology is "High Priest" (2:17; 3:1; 4:14, 15; etc.) While in this essay we are more particularly concerned with Christ's priesthood, one should not forget that in the New Testament he is not only our Priest or High Priest. He is Prophet, Priest and King. As King he shares God's throne and all authority is given to him in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18; Acts 2:33; 1 Cor 15:25; Heb 1:3, 13; Rev 3:21; etc). The same New Testament regards him as the prophet par excellence, *sent* from God as were the Old Testament prophets (2 Chron 36:15, 16; Jer 25:4; 26:4-5; 29:19), "the prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14; cf. 1:21; 7:40), the fulfillment of the prophecy of Deut 19:15, 18. His high priestly ministry is more carefully investigated in this essay.

4. For a valuable discussion of Christ as Priest and High priest, see Oscar Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), chap. 4.

5. Six times Christ's priesthood is compared to that of Melchizedek in Hebrews, (5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:11, 15, 17). One should not lose sight of the fact that Melchizedek was "resembling the Son of God" (Heb 7:3). His priesthood is not to be taken as the standard, thinking of Christ's as conforming to that pattern. It is the other way around: Christ's priesthood is definitive. Melchizedek helps us to understand it better.

6. Regarding the twofold priestly ministry of Christ, see, for instance, Frank B. Holbrook, *The Atoning Priesthood of Jesus Christ* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1996), chaps. 1, 6, and 7.

7. Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 822.

8. The English word "priest" is a contracted transliteration of the Greek *presbyteros* and the Latin *presbyter*, "elder," from which it has derived by a process of compressing several syllables into one.

9. The priesthood of all believers has been a major concept in Protestantism. As urged first by Martin Luther, it denoted the duty of every Christian to hear the confession of fellow Christians, grant forgiveness to them, and sacrifice the self to God (Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966], 313-318). It has come to mean the right of all Christians to approach God without a priestly mediator, to interpret the Scriptures for themselves, or to preside at worship activities. All of these, however in harmony with Scripture, are applications of the Petrine statement rather than the result of exegesis.

10. Although through the centuries "the rite of ordination by the laying on of hands was greatly abused" and "unwarranted importance was attached to the act, as if a power came

at once upon those who received such ordination" (*Acts of the Apostles*, 162), Ellen G. White early exhorted Seventh-day Adventists to "lay hands upon those who have given full proof that they have received their commission of God, and set them apart to devote themselves entirely to his work. This act would show the sanction of the church to their going forth as messengers to carry the most solemn message ever given to men" (*Early Writings*, 101).

11. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the pros and cons of this view. Each side has been amply set forth. We shall limit ourselves to a few remarks from the perspective of the universal priesthood of believers.