

Priesthood of Believers

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In spite of its affirmation of the priesthood of all believers, there is perhaps no function which Protestantism has so much neglected. Not only have Protestant laymen not assumed the priestly role, but until recently even the clergy have shunned it. A major task for Protestant churches today, not merely the clergy but the whole church, is to understand and accept their priesthood.¹

Introduction

Throughout our history Seventh-day Adventists have held the doctrine of priesthood of believers as one of our cardinal beliefs and most cherished distinctives. Early in our history Ellen G. White affirmed: “Every soul is to minister. . . . All are not called upon to enter the ministry, but nevertheless, they are to minister. . . . Ministry means not only the study of books and preaching. It means service.”²

Yet the fact is that in spite of our profession we have seriously misunderstood and certainly inadequately expressed the full meaning of this doctrine. In breaking with the sacramental and ecclesiastical view of the church, Seventh-day Adventists, in general, have interpreted this doctrine to mean only that every believer has free and direct access to God without the necessity for the intermediation of a human priesthood. While this interpretation is certainly

1 E. Glenn Hinson, *The Church: Design for Survival* (Nashville, 1967), 95.

2 *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* 4 (Washington, DC, 1955): 1159.

true, it is only half the meaning of this doctrine. What we have failed to understand adequately is that the priesthood of believers also teaches that every Christian is a priest or minister and thus has a ministry to perform. As the Quaker Elton Trueblood has pointed out,

Most Protestants pay lip service to the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of every believer, but they do not thereby mean to say that every Christian is a minister. Many hasten to add that all they mean by the familiar doctrine is that nobody needs to confess to a priest, since each can confess directly to God. The notion that this doctrine erases the distinction between laymen and ministers is seldom presented seriously, and would, to some be shocking, but it does not take much study of the New Testament to realize that the early Christians actually operated on this revolutionary basis.³

There are those who feel that the priesthood of believers can be interpreted only in a collective sense. There are others, however, who feel that this doctrine has both individual and corporate aspects. That is, it may be viewed both from the perspective that each individual Christian is a priest and also from the perspective of the priesthood of the congregation.

The priesthood of believers means each believer offering his own body: it also means Christ the high-priest offering his body, the Church. These two aspects of the one perpetual offering may be distinguished in thought: they cannot be separated in fact.⁴

For our purpose this distinction is not of primary importance, for whether it is viewed individually or collectively, the essential purpose is always the same—ministry.

As we shall see, the New Testament does not limit the call to minister to a few, nor is there any indication that “call” can be attached to one kind of gift and not to another, or that one may be called to preach but not to administrate or to give personal service to others. By the fourth century of the Christian era, however, the work of ministry as well as the public manifestations of religion were restricted to an ecclesiastical elite.

Neither do we permit the laity to perform any of the offices belonging to the priesthood as for instance neither the sacrifice, nor baptism, nor laying

³ *Your Other Vocation* (New York, 1952), 30.

⁴ T. W. Manson, *Ministry and Priesthood: Christ and Ours* (The Epworth Press, 1958), 64. Torrance disagrees. He sees the priesthood of believers only in a collective sense. “The expression ‘priesthood of all believers’ is an unfortunate one as it carries with it a ruinous individualism. ‘Priest’ in the singular is never found in the NT applied to the believer, any more than ‘king’ in the singular. In the singular these words could only apply to Christ Himself. Like the term ‘saint’ used only collectively in the NT, ‘priests’ and ‘kings’ apply corporately to the whole membership in the church.” T. F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood* [London, 1955], 35, n. 1).

on or hands, nor the blessing whether the smaller or greater; for "No one taketh this honor to himself, but he that is called of God (Heb.5:4)."⁵

Any who presumed the functions reserved for the ordained clergy "shall undergo the punishment of Uzziah."⁶

Twelve centuries later, Robert Baillie, a Scottish representative to the Westminster Assembly of Divines, looked with displeasure at the sight of lay preachers running "without any call, either from God or man into every shire of the Kingdome." The enthusiasm generated by the lay preachers even made some impact at Cambridge, where undergraduates began preaching in their rooms and in the houses of the townsfolk, causing concern that they might attempt to organize their own churches. As a result, Parliament forbade lay preaching in 1644, 1645, and again in 1646.

Happily, these restrictive measures were relaxed by Oliver Cromwell. Later George Fox, the Quaker, had this to say on the subject:

Let there be no outward law to hinder or restrain any People from hearing any whom they believe is a minister of the Gospel, nor yet compel any to hear anyone they believe is not a minister of the Gospel.⁷

Earlier, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther laid down the basic principle:

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.⁸



He further associated baptism with the believer's induction into a life of service when he wrote, "Everyone who has been baptized may claim that he already has been consecrated priest, bishop, or pope. . . ."⁹ While he maintained the necessity of special ceremony in connection with pastoral duties, and insisted that "it is not seemly for any particular person arbitrarily to exercise the office," we shall see later that Luther's insight into the mission of the whole people of God was articulated as the universal priesthood of believers.

The most recent expression of such an ecclesiology is reflected in the

⁵ *Apostolic Constitutions*, 3.19.6-7.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Quoted from *A Collection of the Sacred Books and Writings . . . by George Fox*, and cited in Richard L. Greaves, "Journal of Ecclesiastical History" 21 (1970), 225-41, art. "The Ordination Controversy and the Spirit of Reform in Puritan England."

⁸ Quoted by Jaroslav Pelikan, *Spirit Versus Structure* (New York, 1968), 13.

⁹ Martin Luther, "An Appeal to the Ruling Class (1520)," quoted in Lewis W. Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation* (Englewood Cliffs, 1966), 54.

documents of Vatican II the stress is placed on the lay apostolate. Paragraph ten on the chapter, “The People of God” spells out the new direction of *De Ecclesia*:

Christ the Lord, the high priest taken from among men (cf. Heb. 5,1-5), made the new People ‘a kingdom of priests to God the Father’ (Apoc. 1,6; 5,9, 10). The baptized by the regeneration and anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all the works of a Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (cf. 1 Peter 2,4-10). Therefore, let all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God (cf. Acts 2,42-47), present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God (cf. Romans 12,1). Everywhere on earth let them bear witness to Christ and give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life that is in them (cf. 1 Peter 3,15).¹⁰

Years before Vatican II, Ellen G. White acknowledged the priesthood of those not ordained to an office when she wrote:

The Lord employs various instruments for the accomplishment of His purpose; and while some with special talents are chosen to devote all their energies to the work of teaching and preaching the gospel, many others, upon whom human hands have never been laid in ordination, are called to act an important part in soulsaving.¹¹

Early in the Methodist movement John Wesley struggled with the problem of ordination as the qualification for ministry. However, faced with a shortage of preachers as his movement grew, he had to resort to “laymen,” though reluctantly. Yet, in time, he could say:

Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they are clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of Hell, and set up the kingdom of heaven upon earth.¹²

Unordained men inaugurated Methodism in America for the most part, and Wesley himself has no illusions about the ministry of the unordained in the spread of the gospel. “Was Calvin ordained?” he inquired. “Was he either Priest or Deacon? And were not most of those whom it pleased God to employ in promoting the Reformation abroad, laymen also? Could that great work have been promoted in many places, if laymen had not preached?”¹³

10 “*De Ecclesia*,” *The Constitution on the Church of Vatican Council II*, ed. Edward H. Peters, CSP. (Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1965), pp. 80-81.

11 Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA, 1950), 355.

12 Quoted in Horton Davies, *The English Free Churches* (Oxford, 1952), 133.

13 Robert W. Burtner and Robert E. Chiles, *A Compend of Wesley's Theology* (New York, 1954), 262,



Ample biblical and historical evidence can be marshalled to show that responsibility for carrying out the gospel mandate as well as the ministry of the church was neither restricted to an ordained ministerial elite nor tied to any one pattern of church leadership. In fact, it will be shown that baptism is the fundamental call to the priesthood of believers and all subsequent priestly activity are dependent upon this primary call. In this paper the priesthood of believers will be examined from a biblical perspective, Luther's teaching, and finally in relationship to baptism as ordination.

Biblical Perspectives on the Priesthood of Believers.

The most direct references to the priesthood of believers are found in 1 Peter and Revelation. In 1 Peter, Christians are referred to as "a holy priesthood" whose function it was "to offer up spiritual sacrifices" (2:5). They are a "royal priesthood" whose tasks it was to "show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (2:9). Revelation 1:5-6 says, "unto him that loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and have made us kings and priests unto God. . . ." In the "new song" sung in praise to Christ, Christians are referred to as "kings and priests" (Rev 5:10). In Revelation 20:6 it is said of Christians, "they shall be priests of God and of Christ."

The idea that the people of God should be a kingdom of priests was not a convenient human arrangement nor was it the product of the minds of men; It was God's will. The statement is crystal clear: "Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priest" (Exod 19:6). But who are these "priests" and what are they covenanted to do? The answer is inextricably tied to a Biblical understanding of "laity."

The clue to the identity of the laity is provided by the term itself—when biblically defined. The qualification is necessary because of the devaluation of biblical meaning in our vernacular use of the word. Today the "laity" signifies the secular notion of "nonprofessionals" in distinction from those who are specially trained or skilled, a concept derived from the religious idea of "ordinary believers" in distinction from those who are by training and office set apart as "clergy." It is this distinction between a lower and a higher order, with the laity classified as the lower, that is foreign to the theological understanding of the laity in the scriptures.

quoting from Wesley's Works, "A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," 3.10.12.

Having entered the English language by way of the latin adjective *laicus*, a derivative of the Greek equivalent *laikos* (belonging to the people), the noun “laity” has its original source in the Greek word *laos* (people). In New Testament parlance *laos* frequently expresses an important theological concept, a concept inherited from the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew OT. In the Septuagint, *laos* is used with amazing consistency to translate the Hebrew word *am* (people), which itself is employed in the OT almost exclusively as a designation of *Israel*. When non-Israelite peoples are mentioned in the OT, the Hebrew text tends to use the term *goyim*, which the Septuagint renders by *ethne* (Gentiles). In this close association with Israel, *laos* loses its general meaning of “crowd” or “population,” and takes on the sense of a specific people, a people not in “mass” but in “union” because of the unique call of God. This people—Israel—is a special people precisely because of its origin and destiny in God’s electing grace. Israel understands itself as *laos theou* (the people of God).

Laity: People of God in the Old Testament

A classical expression of this self understanding is set forth in Exodus 19:4-7. God says to Moses:

You 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 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. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.

So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the Lord had commanded him. And all the people answered together and said, “all that the Lord has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.

Notice that even though “the elders of the people ” are mentioned here the covenant is made with “all the people.” The *laos* as a whole is God’s “possession,” chosen not for privilege alone but for the privilege of service. Notice also that the nature of this service is spelled out in direct connection with God’s claim upon “all the earth.” Israel is called from “among all the peoples” to serve as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” in behalf of the kingdoms and *nations of the world*. In this priestly service, Israel represents God to the world and the world to God. This people, the *laos* of God, is called, constituted, and commissioned to fulfill a mediating ministry.

So far as this ministry to the peoples of the earth is concerned, there is not

the slightest justification in the terms of the covenant for that “split-level” distinction between “ordinary believer” and “clergy,” between “novice” and “professional,” which characterizes our contemporary use of the term “laity.” On the contrary, our concept of the laity is altogether excluded by God’s call to the entire *laos* to serve as “a kingdom of priests.” Even the later development of an official priesthood within Israel does not nullify this fundamental task of the people of God. For this later official priesthood always functions in a representative capacity for the entire *laos*, and its purpose is to enable the people as a whole to fulfill its priestly ministry to the world. Put simply, the laity of ancient Israel is composed of all who “belong to the people,” to the people who belong to God. And the priestly service which constitutes obedience to God in the keeping of the covenant is the privilege and responsibility of the *laos* in its entirety.

Laity: People of God in the New Testament

It is this theological meaning of *laos* which passes from the OT, by way of the Septuagint, into the NT when the term is used with reference to both the Israel of old and the new Israel, the Christian community (Gal 6:16). The most remarkable affirmation of this continuity between the NT community of faith and that of the OT is presented in the first letter of Peter:

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. (2:9, 10)

Here the traditional titles of honor ascribed in the OT to Israel as the *laos* of God are applied without reservation to the Christian community. What makes this affirmation remarkable is the fact that the titles are here ascribed to a community composed of both Jews and Gentiles. Those who were once “no people” but who are now “God’s people” are the Gentile Christians. In Christ the radical distinction and separation between the *laos* and the *ethne*, between Israel and the Gentiles has been transcended. The circle of membership in the people of God is now drawn from a new center—Jesus Christ the Lord and Savior of the world. Through the gospel God has called all people “out of darkness into His marvelous light.” And all who respond to this call in faith are numbered among those who now “have received mercy.” (cf. also Paul’s similar affirmation in Rom 9:24-26).

The titles of honor, however, make it plain that membership in the Christian community is not an honorary position. For explicit in the titles is

the task which they mandate. And this task, again specified as a priestly service, is given as before to the *laos* in general and to its members in particular. Whatever the leadership roles within this priestly community may be (and the NT attests to a great variety), the fact remains that here, as in Exodus 19:4-7, the priesthood and its responsibilities are assigned to the whole *laos*. As in ancient Israel, so also in the new Israel the laity are those who “belong to the people” to the people who belong to God, to the God who in Jesus Christ calls them to a mediating ministry in behalf of the world.

Throughout the New Testament one finds this emphasis on the ministry of the laity. Paul’s letters were addressed to the churches, to all the members, not just to the apostles. He reminds them of their “holy calling” and their “ministry.”

And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. (2 Cor 5:18-19, KJV)

Robinson points out that “the New Testament is full of expressions referring to ‘calling,’ ‘being called,’ ‘to be called’ and they always refer to *all* Christians and not to what we style ‘ministers’.” All Christians are ministers, “called” to a ministry.¹⁴

It is true that both *kleros* (clergy) and *laos* (laity) appear in the New Testament, “but, strange to say, they denote the same people, not different people.”¹⁵ For example in 2 Corinthians 6:16 we find, “for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people [*laos*].” While in 1 Peter 5:3 we find the writer exhorting the elders not to view themselves as being “lords over God’s heritage, but being examples to the flock” (*kleros*). This, of course, is not to suggest that there was not some type of “official ministry” in the NT. In the passage just cited the elders would be viewed as the “official ministry.” Yet they were warned about the danger of making too wide a distinction between themselves and their flock (*kleros*) so that they would tend to “lord it over” them. In Ephesians 4 we have the most mature statement in the New Testament concerning the “official ministry.” Here Paul speaks of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers (vs. 11). He then describes their work as being “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of

¹⁴ William Robinson, *Completing the Reformation* (Lexington, 1955), 19-20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (vs. 12, KJV). In this connection, Robinson has a very interesting suggestion. He says, “the comma after ‘saints’ is not in the Greek text and I would contend that it ought not to be there at all. Then the official minister’s chief job is to equip saints for the work of the ministry.”¹⁶

In the light of the doctrine of the priesthood of believers it would seem that the central integrating principle around which the preacher’s ministry is to be built is to “equip the saints for the work of the ministry.” Thus the so called “clergy,” themselves members of the *laos*, have their own special ministry within the priestly community. And this ministry enjoys ample biblical warrant but when it is identified as “the ministry” of the community itself, as has been the tendency within the history of the church the result is a theological disaster. For the *laos* then delegates the ministry, primarily if not exclusively, to the “clergy,” and the “clergy” relegates the “laity” (now understood as non-clergy) to the role of a “supporting cast.” Further, this identification of the ministry of the *laos* with the special ministry of the *kleros* (clergy) also introverts the direction of the ministry of God’s people. For the ministry of the “clergy” is directed predominantly to the community itself with the result that the ministry of the community to the world is shamefully neglected. The ministry inevitably becomes self-serving, directed *inward* toward the development and preservation of individual faith and institutional health.

Laity: A Royal Priesthood

In 1 Peter, as we have seen, Christians are referred to as “a holy priesthood” whose function it was to “offer up spiritual sacrifices” (2:5). They are called a “royal priesthood.”

What is the nature of the sacrifices that were to be offered? It is important that this be clearly understood, for the nature of the sacrifices will determine the nature of this ministry. A part of the answer is found in Hebrews where the uniqueness of the sacrifice of Jesus, the great High Priest, is magnified. “His sacrifice is defined as the doing of God’s will. It was His body that God desired, not sacrifices and offerings.”¹⁷ What, then, is the nature of the sacrifice of the priesthood of believers? They are to offer themselves. They are to present their “bodies a living sacrifice” (Rom 12:1) to be instruments of redemption as they “show forth the praises of Him who hath called” them

¹⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹⁷ Paul S. Mincar, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1960), 100.



“out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). Thus when one unites with the community of believers, when one enters into the priesthood of believers, he is thereby uniting with Jesus in God’s redemptive purpose in the world.

In the New Testament community there is no office that corresponded to the Jewish concept of priests. “The only priests under the gospel, designated as such in the New Testament, are the saints, the members of the Christian brotherhood.”¹⁸ T. W. Manson points out that when priests were converted (Acts 6:7), they did not thereby perform the function of priests (in the Jewish sense) in the Christian community. In the listing of the church ministries in 1 Corinthians 12:28-30 and Ephesians 4:11-12 no mention is made of priests. Therefore he concludes that in the New Testament church “there was not room for a regular priesthood, as *priesthood was understood in that time.*”¹⁹ However, the tendency toward institutionalism in this area is recognized, for he says that by the end of the second century²⁰ the office of bishop had become

18 J. B. Lightfoot, *The Christian Ministry* (London., 1901), 6.

19 T. W. Manson, 44, emphasis his.

20 The church of the first two centuries had been a small and closely-knit body scattered through the cities of the Roman Empire. So long as it remained such, the laity retained an important role in its organization and liturgy. When in 197, Tertullian described the Church in Roman Africa, he called it “a society with a common religious feeling, a unity of discipline and a bond of hope” (Tertullian, *Apology*, ed. Glover, 39:1). “Where three are together,” he says elsewhere, “there is the Church, even they are laymen.” (_____, *De Exhortatione Castitatis* 7). The Holy Spirit imposed an equality on priests and laymen alike: the services which Tertullian describes were evidently not yet standardized. The congregation met “to read the books of God” (_____, *Apology*, 39:3) and then “each from what he knows of the Holy Scripture or from his own heart is called upon before the rest to sing to God” (Ibid., 39:8).

The laity took a leading part in this liturgy, and behind these practices lay an ecclesiology, which regarded *Christianity less an organization than as a way of life* under the continuous guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The third century was to see some radical changes in this point of view, changes which affected adversely the position of the laity in the Church. By the middle of the century, the monarchical episcopate had become universally recognized system of church government. *Ordination* was a permanent step, setting the cleric rapidly apart from the world he had renounced. The second baptism of oil and balsam for an elite clergy eroded the meaning of the concept of the priesthood of all believers (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* [Grand Rapids, 1950], 3:238ff.). At the same time, significant changes were going on among the clergy themselves which increased the distance between them and the mass of the faithful. [See Cornelius’s letter to Fabius of Antioch, cited by Eusebius *H.E.*, VI. 43, 11.] The deacon was tending to become more pronouncedly an *administrator*, and thus encroaching on the functions which laymen were performing in the service of the Church. (See the situation in Carthage where deacons are mentioned as supervisors of funds belonging to the Church in 251 [Cyprian, *Letter* 52.1].) Fifty years later the senior deacon there had become the heir presumptive to his bishop’s see. The Holy Spirit was being firmly guided into ecclesiastical channels. In the earlier part of the fourth century the *Apostolic Constitutions* defined the role of the layman:

The layman should honour the good shepherd (the bishop), respect him like a father, lord and master, as the high priest of God as guide in piety. . . . He who hears the bishop hears Christ (*Constitution of the Holy Apostles* II, 16 and 21, in *ANF*, ed. Alexander

“a sacrificial office as was that of the Jewish priest”. He goes on to say,

The fact is that there is here a parting of the ways: priesthood is on the way to be completely bound up with the right of a specialized group within the Church to offer the eucharistic sacrifice of bread and cup identified with the body and blood of Christ. The priesthood of all believers, on the other hand, is on the way to become a godly sentiment with little or no relevance to the day-to-day practice of the Church at worship.²¹

As important as these matters are, they are important only for the sake of the vitality and sensitivity of the community’s ministry to the world. Only if and when the *laos* as a whole discovers and recovers its identity as a priesthood unto God for the sake of a mediating ministry to the world will its service become genuinely extroverted and thereby authenticated. Then the respective roles of the “laity” and “clergy” will be reversed with the former taking the lead in their daily interface with the society at large and their unashamed witness in the world of which they are a part and the latter supporting this primary and priority ministry of the people of God through their special ministry of the Word. It is this outward direction of the ministry of the *laos* which is mandated by its identity as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”

This understanding of the priesthood of believers calls for a widespread recognition and honoring of the biblical vision of the unity of the *laos* of God, of the ministry of all members and of the vocation of all Christians. It will be realized only if the “non-clergy” are willing to move up, if the “clergy” are willing to move over, and if all God’s people are willing to move out. For the ministry of this community is rendered first and foremost in the world and for the world. It is performed in the daily lives of its people, in their sacrificial obedience in the church and in their mission to proclaim the good news in all the world. For Seventh-day-Adventists it has serious eschatological conse-

Roberts and James Donaldson [New York, 1899]).

The bishop is described as “the keeper of knowledge, the mediator between God and you in the several parts of your divine worship” (Ibid., 410). Church architecture reflected the growing division between clergy and laity as *stone screens* divided the nave from the altar and apse whither only the clergy might approach. (For examples, see H. Leclercq, art. “Basilique” in *Dictionari d’archeologie chretienne et de Liturgie* 2, 1, 540.) No layman might participate in the administration of the sacraments. (The priest stood and the layman knelt. See, *Apostolic Canons*, Canon 40, and Roland H. Bainton, “The Ministry in the Middle Ages,” *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives*, ed. H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel D. Williams [New York, 1956], 91.) No psalms written by individual Christians were to be sung in the church (*Council of Laodicea*, Canon 59. Bruns, *Canones Apostolorum et Conciliorum*, Berlin, 1893m). Laymen were to sit “quietly and seemly” in their places. With the imposition of celibacy in the eleventh century —though it was not yet universally obeyed —the demarcation had reached its final stage (Bainton)

21 Ibid., 68.



quences because “the work of God in this earth can never be finished until the men and women comprising our church membership rally to the work, and unite their efforts with those of ministers and church officers.”²²

Luther’s teaching on the Priesthood of Believers

The historian Philip Schaff identifies three fundamental principles around which the Reformation was to turn: “the supremacy of the *Scriptures* over tradition, the supremacy of *faith* over works, and the supremacy of the *Christian people* over an exclusive priesthood.”²³ It is the third principle that we will address.

It was Martin Luther’s contention that the Christian alone with his Bible was his own priest: all Christians were priests and had the privilege—indeed, were under the necessity—of dealing with God face to face. Luther stated this often and with piercing clarity as for example in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) when he discussed the pretenses of Roman Catholic “priests”:

If they were forced to grant that all of us that have been baptized are equally priests, and as indeed we are, . . . they would then know that they have no right to rule over us except in so far as we freely concede it. For thus it is written in 1 Peter 2: ‘you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and priestly royalty.’ Therefore we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians.²⁴

Luther’s Understanding of the Status of Individual Believers

Luther used two basic arguments to undergird his idea of the priesthood of all believers. First, he was convinced by a simple syllogism that in Christ all believers shared equally in the priesthood. Christ is a priest; in Christ be become like him; therefore, we too are priest. Or in his own words: “Since [Christ] is a priest and we are his brethren, all Christians have the power and must fulfill the commandment to preach and to come before God with our intercessions for one another and to sacrifice ourselves to God.”²⁵

In the second place, Luther saw that Scripture itself tells the Christian that he is an eternal priest superior even to the old Levitic order: “The Scriptures

22 Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC, 1915), 352.

23 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* 6 (New York, 1916): 15-16

24 Martin Luther, “On Ordination,” *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia., 1925), 2, 279.

25 “Epistle S. Petri qepredigt . . . “

of God . . . assert, 'you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.'"²⁶ But in this second instance the Christian has more than the bare word of Scripture, said Luther: "He has that Word quickened in his hearing until it becomes the voice of his Shepherd, the very Word of God Himself."²⁷ It is this Living Word in a believer that creates a priest of God, and equips the Christian for a life of service to God. This Word involves the power of the Holy Spirit which converts men and sets them on the path of sanctification. Luther described Christians as ones "inwardly taught by God" and as having "God's word . . . on (their) side." And this, to Luther, was the simple fact that made the humblest Christian peasant the equal of the mightiest Christian lord. Luther could boldly state: "Therefore, when we grant the Word to anyone we cannot deny anything to him pertaining to the exercise of his priesthood."²⁸ And further:

A cobbler, a smith, a farmer, each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and every one by means of his own work of office must benefit and serve every other, that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, even as all the members of the body serve one another.²⁹

It was on this basis, then, that Luther denounced the hierarchy of spiritual being on which the Roman Catholic Church rested. No one had the right to claim an exalted spiritual status or to denigrate another as somehow less Christian: "For since we have proved all of these things to be the common property of all Christians, no one individuals can arise by his own authority and arrogate to himself alone what belongs to all."³⁰ This type of thinking explains why Luther could admonish the Augsburg Diet in 1530 to recognize the Roman Catholic Church as a false church because it advocated unbiblical pagan prerogatives and granted extraordinary privileges to its priests. And it explained to Luther why the Roman Catholic establishment raged against him so—his proclamation of the clear Word of God concerning the equal status of all Christians cut their feet of clay right out from under them.

Luther and the Doctrine of Church

But if this was the status of individual believers, what place could the Church have? How could the church be important if believers were their own

26 "Concerning the Ministry," *Works*, 40.14.

27 "That a Christian Assembly . . .," *Works*, 4. 79.

28 "Concerning the Ministry," *Works*, 40. 21ff. cf. 34f.

29 "Address to the Nobility," *Works*, 2, 69.

30 *Ibid.*

priests and could approach God on their own? Luther's reply to this question was simply that the church is important *because* it is made up exclusively of priests. The modern Protestant concept of believers' priesthood is, in fact, far from the concept Luther proposed. He did not see the priesthood of believers as a warrant for individualistic posturing before God and closed-hearted isolation from other members of the church. On the contrary, a priest for Luther was one who, although he had the privilege of standing before God, also had definite rights and duties among men because of his special status as God's priest.

A simple dictionary definition of the word "priest" clues us into this insight, for a priest is someone who performs religious duties *for other people*. To be a priest certainly means that one can come face to face before God; yes, indeed! But the reverse side of priesthood is that one has a responsibility and privilege of working among others as God's representative.

Only when we understand this concept of the priesthood of believers does Luther's fastidiousness in giving names to the church make sense. For Luther was concerned that the church's true nature as a body of priests not be obscured by formal terms that stress structure and hide the essential aspect of priestly intercommunion. Luther much preferred the phrase "a holy Christian people" (*Sancta Catholica Christiana*) to the bare word "church" (*Ecclesia*). *Ecclesia*, he thought, is often taken to mean the church building, a most unfortunate usage; it is occasionally used to refer to the Christians in any one particular area or era, and this is somewhat better; but in reality the church is the communion of all holy Christian people from all time, a reality that the word "Church" obscures. Luther felt that the abuses of the Papal hierarchy might have been reduced if *ecclesia* had been understood as "a holy Christian people," the true meaning of the body of Christ. In German, Luther favored words for the Church such as *haufe* (group) or *versammlung* (assembly) rather than such words as *gemeinschaft* (association). In this he was faithful to the New Testament usage of *ecclesia*, for there *ecclesia* always means God's "called-out ones" all over the world or those gathered in a specific place.

Through whatever words he could find, Luther was determined to eliminate static, parochial, or institutional connotations of the word "church" and to refocus attention on the gathering of individual Christians under the Word of God. He affirmed that "the Church is a spiritual assembly of souls in one faith."³¹ The *Communio Sanctorum* (Communion of Saints) which Luther saw as the key definition of the church had to mean both the gathering of holy

31 "Papacy at Rome," *Works*, I, 340.

people and the communion among them if the church was ever to reflect its actual importance as that entity in which Christian priests are active. He was more comfortable in saying that the church is a priesthood than the church has a priesthood. For it was in the *communion* of believers that priesthood played such an important role. If we in our day are to regain a sound view of the importance of the church, we too will have to see it as a place in which Christian priests are active toward one another and active corporately in the world.

Luther's View of the Role and Function of the Believers' Priesthood

On several occasions Luther outlined just what the duties and responsibilities of Christian priests were. In "Concerning the Ministry," a letter to the Bohemian Christians written in 1523 he described in some detail the rights and privileges that a Christian priest bore as he represented God to other Christians and the world. These rights and privileges had in the popular mind of his day been restricted to a tight coterie of the spiritual elite. In our day these matters have been equally neglected because of our preoccupation with the fact that we stand as priests directly before God. The Bohemians, remnants of the Hussite movement were concerned with problems involved in obtaining an ordained ministry. Luther not only defended their right to select or approve their own ministers but also said that as Christians their rights and duties extended into many other areas of service. For the brotherhood: the ministry of the Word, the right to baptize, to administer the Lord's Supper, to exercise the office of the keys, to sacrifice their bodies to Christ (as per Romans 12:1), to pray for one another and to judge doctrinal teaching.³² In some, the Papists had illicitly tried to tear from the Bohemians the presence of the Holy Spirit that inhered in every Christian and that bestowed the above rights on all believers. And these were primarily rights to be exercised with, for, or to other Christians and the world. These rights and duties contrast sharply with the casual relationships common among modern church members.

In an earlier tract of that same year, "That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching . . ." Luther had defended even more explicitly the right of every Christian to take an active role in proclaiming the teaching of the church. Offensive teaching was not to be an occasion to leave the church. He cited many Scripture passages (e.g., Matt 7:15; John 6:45) to buttress this defense of "private judgment," always we must remember harking back to the biblical-word-in-the-believer as that

³² Pp. 21ff. cf. 34f.

which equips him and gives him the responsibility to judge teaching. And Luther concluded with a very strong statement: “Here again it is certain that a Christian not only has the right and power to teach God’s word but has the duty to do so on pain of losing his soul and of God’s favor.” Therefore, to be a priest meant that each believer had to be a preacher of the gospel for the benefit of his fellow believers and also non-Christians.

But for Luther the responsibilities of Christian priests went much further than preaching the gospel or exercising a sustained concern about the content of teaching. The priesthood of all Christians meant that a believer may be the agency through which his brother can be assured of the forgiveness of his sins. Luther wrote in 1522:

This means that I may go to my good friend and say to him, ‘Dear friend, this is the trouble and the difficulty which I am having with sin,’ and he should be free to say to me ‘your sins are forgiven, go in the peace of God.’ You should absolutely believe that your sins are forgiven as though Christ Himself were your Father Confessor—as long as your friend does this in the name of God.³³

Believers priesthood meant also that a Christian’s goods and his spiritual exercises were forfeit to the needs to the church. In 1520 Luther wrote in an exposition of the Ten Commandments:

I believe that in this community of Christendom all things are common, the goods of one belong to the other and that no one possess anything that is his own. As a result all prayers and all good works of the entire community help me and every believer; They all stand by and strengthen each other in every time of life and of death so that each one bears the others burdens, as St. Paul teaches.³⁴

That, says Luther, is what the priesthood of believers means. These are some of the things entailed among the responsibilities of those who have been granted the exalted privilege of communing directly with God through the sole mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is why the church was so important for Luther, because he saw it as the place where the priesthood of the individual could find its natural expression and could benefit from the ministrations of other priestly believers. Paul Althaus sums this up nicely in his *Theology of Martin Luther*: “The universal priesthood expresses not religious individualism but its exact opposite. The reality of the congregation as a community.”³⁵

33 *Acht Sermones*

34 *Eine kurze Form der 10 Gebote.*

35 Paul Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther* (Fortress, 1966), 314.

And it is because it is where Christian priests are active, the community (i.e., the church) takes on immense significance. The concept of priesthood advocated by go-it-alone Protestantism is a momentous distortion of Luther's teaching because it fails to realize the immense importance of the church for Christian priests.

Luther was not playing games when he laid such great significance on the church. In his eyes the role of the church was so great that a proper understanding of its function was a true requirement for Christian life. All Christians were priests and all priests needed to function. By this very functioning the gospel became alive and changed men for God. As Althaus once again summarizes well: "This seems to be the greatest thing about the community for Luther: God's Word, the gospel, is always near and present to me so that I am everywhere surrounded by its sound and do not need to ask for it. It is close to me in every brother, for he may, in God's name, speak it to me in my trouble."³⁶

It was this concept of priesthood, therefore, involving *both* rights before God *and* definite, spiritual responsibilities to others in the church and in the world which led Luther to say "whoever seeks Christ must find the church" and "I believe no one can be saved who is not part of this community and does not live in harmony with it." **The care and concern shown by a true priest for his Christian brother or for a prospective Christian did not create a barrier between God and man as the Roman Catholic priesthood had.** True Christian priesthood was rather a conduit through which the love of God in Christ Jesus could be channeled to another person with great immediacy. He said, "each should become as it were a Christ to the other, that we may be Christ's to one another and Christ may be the same in all; that is, that we may be truly Christians."³⁷

Furthermore, it was as Christian priests took their responsibilities to one another seriously that the church became the place where the Holy Spirit works faith and sanctification in the life of the believer. Because the Holy Spirit was active in Christian people, not only or even primarily for their own benefit, *others* in the church would be strengthened in the faith. That is, as God's priests minister to one another the Holy Spirit was active in building up the church through the interlocking and mutually supporting activity of its members.

These ideas signaled a revolution in the concept of the church. In place of a hierarchical and stratified ecclesiastical structure, Luther proposed a model

³⁶ Ibid. 318

³⁷ "Christian Liberty," *Works* 2, 330, cf. 337.

based on the equality of all members under the head, Christ. He replaced the rule of the oligarchical few and the rule of the democratic many, with the rule of the eternal Son of God who was active in all true members. And as Jesus in His life upon the earth lived and died for others, so must His children, those in whom He lives, spend their lives in service for others on an individual basis: first to their brothers in Christ and then to the world. The salvation Christ has accomplished for His children is the keystone of the church, for this salvation enables all Christians to act as finite images of Christ in ministry to others.

The book of Revelation contains a stirring resume of all that Luther was trying to say about the relation of the priesthood and the church. Revelation 5:9-10 it is recorded:

And they sang a new song, saying: 'Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood did ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign upon the earth.'

The church which when it is purified and gathered will be the triumphant kingdom of God consists of priests. Through the blood of the Lamb they have been ransomed of God. They now have the immeasurable privilege of coming before Him face to face clothed in the blood of their Savior. They have the equally immeasurable privileged of representing their Lord to fellow believers and the world. And this service will reach its fulfillment when all the priests of God serve as the rulers of the earth.

The foundation of the church and the source of salvation for individuals are identical: the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross and His triumphant resurrection, which led even captivity captive. Martin Luther saw that the church and the salvation of individuals were bound by this, their common origin. When we realize what it means to be a priest of God as Luther realized, to have not only the right to stand before God but also the responsibility to act as His presence to others, we will have come to value the church as Luther did.

For the church is the place that God has ordained for His priests to be active in personal service to one another and to the world. The church is simply God's living temple in which the priests of God are active in ministry to one another and to those whom God has ordained to bring into that communion.

Luther's View on the Nature and Order of Clerical Ministry

The church is a royal priesthood; priesthood applies to all its members in common. **Does this mean that the church has no special, clerical priesthood?** Luther was challenged by Jerome Emser who admitted that there was indeed

a sense in which all Christians constituted a “spiritual priesthood,” but argued that the New Testament also established a “consecrated priesthood.”³⁸ Luther had already set forth his positive position in 1520 before he wrote his long rebuttal against Emser. **The Reformer asserted that the New Testament says not a word about a “spiritual estate” above the laity, marked with an “indelible character,” equipped by divine right with power not only to dispense divine grace and offer expiatory sacrifices but also to rule the laity. Nevertheless, he insisted that an ordained ministry is necessary in the church, not simply for human, sociological reasons but because it is an apostolic, Christ established ministry. But he insisted that this ordained ministry is derived from and responsible to the universal priesthood of believers.**

Whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already *consecrated* priest, bishop and pope, though it is not seemly that every one should *exercise the office*. Nay, just because we are all in like manner priests, no one must put himself forward and undertake, without our *consent and election*, to do what is in the power of all of us. For what is common to all, no one dare take upon himself without the will and command of the community (Gemeinde); and should it happen that one chosen for such an office were deposed for malfeasance, he would then be just what he was before he held office. Therefore a priest in Christendom is nothing else than an *office-holder*. When he is in office, he has precedence; when deposed, he is a peasant or a townsman like the rest. Beyond all doubt, then, a priest is no longer a priest when he is deposed. . . .

There is really no difference between laymen and priests, princess and bishops, “spirituals” and “temporals,” as they call them except that of *office* and *works*, but not of “estate”; for they are all of the same estate—true priests, bishops, and popes—though they are all not engaged in the same work, just as all priests and monks have not the same work. This is the teaching of St. Paul in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 and St. Peter in 1 Peter 2, as I have said above, viz., that we are all one body of Christ, the Head, all members one of another. Christ has not two different bodies, one “temporal,” the other “spiritual.” He is one Head, and He has one body.

Therefore, just as those who are now called “spiritual”—priests, bishops or popes—are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the Word of God and the Sacraments, which is their work and office, so it is with the temporal authorities—they bear sword and rod with which to punish the evil and to protect the good.³⁹

To be more explicit about the nature of this office:

38 “Answer to Goat Emser,” *Works*, 3, 319-19.

39 “Address to the Nobility,” *Works*, 2, 68-69.

We are all priests, as many of us are Christians. But the priests, as we call them, are *ministers*, chosen from among us, who do all that they do in our name. And the priesthood is nothing but a ministry, as we learn from 1 Corinthians 4:1, “Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.”⁴⁰

Against Emser, Luther insisted:

The Holy Scriptures, particularly in the New Testament, where types are at an end, speak only of one, a *spiritual priesthood*, just as I said when discussing the papacy that the Scriptures speak only of one, a spiritual church. . . . And I hereby make this challenge: If Emser will bring forward a single letter of Scripture in which his churchy (Kirchisch) priesthood is called a priesthood, I will give in to him. But he will not take the challenge.

The Scriptures make us all priests alike, as I have said, but the churchy priesthood which is now universally distinguished from the laity and alone called a priesthood in the Scriptures is called *ministerium, servitus, dispensatio, episcopatus, presbyterium, and at no place sacerdotium or spiritualis*. I must translate that. The Scriptures, I say, call the spiritual estate and priestly office a ministry, a service, an office, an eldership, a fostering, a guardianship, a preaching office, shepherds.⁴¹

When Luther calls the ministry nothing but an “office,” does he depreciate it? Does he ignore its unique holiness, and reduce the ministry to a purely utilitarian conception? No! When Luther suggested dropping the name “priest” for “those who are in charge of Word and sacrament among the people,”⁴² he did so not because he wanted to eliminate the word from Christendom, but because he wanted to exalt it and protect it from sacerdotal misuse. Actually, “there is no greater name or honour before God and men than to be a priest.”⁴³

When Luther said that, because the Christian community should not and cannot be without the Word of God, “it follows therefore logically that it must have teachers and preachers to administer this Word,”⁴⁴ he was not reducing the ministry to a rational postulate. The nature of the Christian ministry is determined by Jesus Christ the Head of the church, and by the Word, the gospel of redemption which He has committed to it. The ministry (reverting to the traditional term, in 1530, Luther calls it the “spiritual estate”!)

40 “Babylonian Captivity,” “On Ordination,” *Works*, 2, 279.

41 “Answer to Goat Emser,” *Works*, 3, 321-22.

42 “Concerning the Ministry,” *Luther’s Works (American ed.)* xi, 14.

43 “Commentary on Ps. 110,” 1535, pp. xiii, 294. The entire exposition [pp. 228-348] concerns the relation of Christ’s high priesthood and the priesthood of the church.)

44 “Light and Power of a Christian Congregation or Community to Judge all Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers,” 1523, *Works*, IV, 70.



has been established and instituted by God, not with gold or silver, but with the precious blood and the bitter death of His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. From His wounds flow the Sacraments . . . , and He earned it dearly that in the whole world men should have this office of preaching, baptizing, loosing, binding, giving the Sacrament, comforting, warning, exhorting with God's Word, and whatever else belongs to the pastoral office. This office not only helps to further and maintain this temporal life and all the worldly classes, but it also delivers from sin and death, which is its proper and chief work. Indeed, the world stands and abides only because of the spiritual estate; if it were not for this estate, it would long since have gone to destruction.⁴⁵

This is an office through which Christ does His work; it may even be said, the minister actually does Christ's work.

So many souls are daily taught by him, converted, baptized and brought to Christ and saved, redeemed from sins, death, hell, and the devil, and through him come to everlasting righteousness, to everlasting life and heaven. . . .

The minister does "great miracles," perhaps in a bodily way, but most certainly "spiritually in the soul, where the miracles are even greater."

Luther adds, significantly,

Not that he does this as a *man*! It is his *office*, ordained by God for this purpose, that does it, that and the *Word* of God which he teaches; *he is the instrument for this*.⁴⁶

This is to say that if one must distinguish between the person of the minister and the office of his ministry, so must one distinguish between the *office*, committed to the minister and the "success" of the minister's service. When Luther calls the clerical office a "service" or "ministry," he is thinking primarily of the objective rather than the subjective aspect. Ruben Josefsen points out that the human service and the divinely instituted office are not to be identified. In reaction to Roman sacerdotalism, Protestants have sometimes tried to protect the holiness of the ministerial office by basing it

on the pietistical idea that the priest's sacrifice is the offering of his own heart to God, and his primary function is to lead others into the kind of spiritual life he himself lives. The priest represents the congregation before God. By such reasoning he is easily made into a religious virtuoso, who, in what is almost a substitutionary way, offers his heart and soul to God. . . . It is in the sacrifice which God Himself makes that the ministry of the Christian Church finds, and must find, its basis. . . . In another context Luther says, "The office of preaching is a ministry which proceeds from Christ, not to Christ; and it

45 "Sermon on Keeping Children in School," *Works*, 4, 142.

46 *Ibid.*, 4, 146.

comes to us, not from us.”⁴⁷

Thus, “the ministry has its foundation in God’s redemptive work in Christ, and is, so to say, the fulcrum by which that work exercises its continuing effectiveness. The ministry as a God-given order is one of the church’s constitutive factors.”⁴⁸ This is the apostolicity of the Christian ministry. It is not simply a human contrivance to assure the continuity of the church.

According to this sociological view, the office is secondary to the church; and the church is secondary to the faith and the persons sharing it. Such a concept cannot be harmonized with the theological view of the nature of the church, as it is found in Luther, for instance. ‘The office of the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments has been instituted that we may come to this faith,’ the Augsburg Confession says. That is in effect to say that the office is antecedent to the faith.⁴⁹

Now, since Christians are essentially the radically equal in dignity within the Church, there is no room for the notion that the clergy “rules” the laity, or that the clergy is necessarily graded internally for purposes of rule.

By way of summary, let it be said that Luther found his doctrine of the priesthood of believers in such Scriptural passages as 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; Galatians 3:28; John 6:45. His references to this doctrine even in later life (e.g., “Sermon at Torgau,” 1544) show that it remained for him an important truth. Brunotte, in his careful synopsis of the evidence, compresses Luther’s doctrine in four points:

1. Before God all Christians have the same standing, a priesthood in which we enter by baptism and through faith.

2. As a comrade and brother of Christ, each Christian is a priest and needs no mediator save Christ. He has access to the Word.

3. Each Christian is a priest and has an office of sacrifice, not the Mass, but the dedication of himself to the praise and obedience to God, and to bearing the Cross.

4. Each Christian has a duty to hand on the gospel which he himself has received.⁵⁰



47 R. Josefson, “The Ministry as an Office in the Church.” in Nygren, ed., *This Is the Church*, 1952, 273-74 [trans. by “En Bok om Kyrkan”]

48 *Ibid.*, 276.

49 *Ibid.*

50 W. Brunotte, *Das geistliche Amt bei Luther* (Berlin, 1959. 133ff.).

Baptism As Ordination and the Priesthood of Believers

Seventh-day Adventists have always preached the equality of all persons before God. To be a part of the body of Christ is to share in the mission and ministry of the church. According to Ellen White, "Every true disciple is born into the kingdom of God as a missionary."⁵¹ T. W. Manson affirms that the ministry of the church is singular. Every question shares the "one essential ministry, that of the Head, our Lord Jesus Christ."⁵² All aspects of that ministry are shared by the whole body, including the task of proclamation. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that ye may declare the wonderful deeds of Him that called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." (1 Pet 2:9). It is obvious that a highly developed professional ministry has contributed to a hierarchal mentality. Even the word "ministers" has come to designate a special class in the church. Some Seventh-day Adventist ordination services have all the characteristics of an enthronement. The situation is such that an artificial barrier has been constructed that separates the ordained minister from the rest of the congregation. History teaches us that the development of offices inevitably leads to some kind of hierarchal mentality. To set apart an individual or group of individuals by ceremony and title infers distinction of some kind. Even when the focus is on function it is difficult to prevent the development of some kind of class system. The priesthood of believers has had no greater exponent than Martin Luther, yet he who proclaimed the equality of shoemaker and bishop wrote that the public ministry of the Word "ought to be established by holy ordination as the highest and greatest of the functions of the church."⁵³ The principle of universal Christian service is blurred. A call to service comes with the call to Christian discipleship. All Christians are called to be servants. Ephesians 4:1-16 is an important passage in this regard. The whole community is challenged to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. . . ." (4:1). There is a common call to a common mission with a common power.

There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all . . . but grace was given to each of us according to the measure of

⁵¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA, 1940), 195.

⁵² *The Church's Ministry*. (London, 1948), 30.

⁵³ "Concerning the Ministry," *Luther's Works*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff, (Philadelphia, 1958), 2, 11.

It is true that some specific gifts are identified—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—but the purpose of these gifts is very specific. They are a means to the end of effective service by the whole body. The individual gifts are for “the equipment of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ” (4:12). The gifts are skills not spiritual qualifications, and they are given to the whole church for the good of the church. Paul includes a different list of gifts in the Corinthian correspondence: “God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues” (1 Cor 12:28). A comparison of the two lists indicates that Paul did not have in mind a hierarchy of offices or even a classification of particular functions. More important is the fact that in both instances the context of the discussion is the organic relationship of the whole body of Christ called by God in Christ, equipped by the Spirit, and motivated by love. The gifts “are not special marks of distinction belonging to a chosen few, whether on account of their enthusiasm or of their office in the church, but a distinguishing mark of the whole church, of the fellowship of all believers.”⁵⁴ The emphasis in the NT is clearly on the effective service of all of God's people. The author, model, and authority for ministry in whatever form it takes is Jesus. “The New Testament meaning of ministry . . . is the humble, faithful service rendered by Jesus Christ as the devoted servant of the Lord (Mark 10:45) and by those who follow in His steps.”⁵⁵

It has been suggested that the doctrine of the priesthood of believers could best be demonstrated by doing away with ordination altogether. It may well be that the greater diversity of ministries does not call for more ordinations but for the abolition of the practice as counter-productive to the mission of the church in the modern world. This was the conclusion of at least one Baptist study group on the subject. “The practice of ordination to the Christian ministry long accepted and useful among us, now may be outdated in a time of rapidly changing and richly diversifying ministries.”⁵⁶ An alternative to ordaining no one and dealing with our dilemma would be to ordain everyone. Baptism might be observed in such a way as to include the concept of ordination to service for every believer. Is there a biblical precedent for such

54 Hans Kung, *The Church*, (Garden City, NY, 1976), 247.

55 William J. Moore, *New Testament Concept of the Ministry*, (St. Louis, 1956), 37-38.

56 E. Spencer Parsons, “The Green Lake Conference on Ordination,” *Foundations* 12 (April-June, 1969), 144.

a practice?

Christ's Baptism and Ours

The meaning of Christian baptism is rooted in the baptism of Jesus (Matt 3:11-17).

Traditionally, the emphasis in Seventh-day Adventists teaching on baptism has centered on three aspects: (1) Baptism is a *personal act of faith*, as opposed to the unbiblical concept of infant baptism;⁵⁷ (2) Baptism is an *outward sign* of the believer's acceptance of God's grace, administered by immersion and marking the washing away and renunciation of sin; and (3) Baptism is the *public confession* of the believer's repentance and covenant with Christ resulting in his incorporation into His body, the Church (Gal 3:26-28; 1 Cor 12:12-14, 27).⁵⁸

But, as comprehensive as are these biblical meanings of baptism, "none of these meanings applies directly to Christ's baptism."⁵⁹ Since Christ's baptism is the prototype of Christian baptism, the baptism of water *and* the baptism of the Spirit belong together. The real meaning of Jesus' baptism, marked by the descent of the Spirit, was that He thereby received His ordination to the ministry (Matt 3:13-17; John 1:29-34). Jesus never returned to the carpenter's shop. His baptism marked the inauguration of His Galilean ministry. Commentators are in agreement that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Jesus at His baptism signified this *ordination to ministry*.

As we have seen Luther held that we are all priests by baptism, and there is no more dramatic expression of the true meaning of priesthood than that in which a believer is incorporated into Christ by the waters of baptism. With Christ buried, rising with Christ and living in Him, the believer is incorporated in the community of the faithful. **Baptism is initiation into the royal priesthood.** It is an attenuated form of baptism which claims less. What happens to such an initiate? The mark of the Cross is upon him, the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit are vouchsafed to him, the prayers of the Church uphold him, and into the fellowship of the redeemed he is received under the threefold Name and in the presence of the people of God.

The vows which we take upon ourselves in baptism embrace much. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit we are buried in the likeness of Christ's death and raised in the likeness of His resurrection, and we are to live a new life. Our life is to be bound up with the life of Christ. . . .

57 Mark 16:16; Acts 2:37-41; 8:12, 26-39; 10:44-48; 6:14, 15, 31-33; 18:8, etc.

58 *Seventh-day Adventists Bible Dictionary*, (Washington, D.C., 1960), 113-14.

59 Gottfried Oosterwal, art. "The Role of the Laity," *Focus* supplement no. 23.

He has made a covenant with God. He has died to the world. He is to live to the Lord, to use for Him all his entrusted capabilities, never losing the realization that he bears God's signature, that he is a subject of Christ's kingdom, a partaker of the divine nature. He is to surrender to God all that he is and all that he has, employing all his gifts to His name's glory.⁶⁰

In the early church the sign of the cross which was made on the forehead and breast was the mark of the soldier of Christ. Augustine often compared this to the *nota militaris* which marked the soldier once for all, for it was branded on his body by his captain, binding him forever to his captain's service and exposing him to punishment for disobedience. The outward sign of the cross and the inward seal of the Spirit indicate not only a presentation but a consecration. That is why in the early church baptism was known as a "priestly consecration." Moreover, the early use of the metaphors of the family and the army shows that the corporate nature of baptism was clearly understood. To be received as a child of God into His family, to be enrolled in the army of God and to be pledged servant of God forever is to be initiated into the royal priesthood.

Through His baptism, Christ was initiated into the ministry which led Him to the cross and resurrection. By seeking the baptism of John, Jesus Himself interpreted His baptism as one of identification with sinners, the initiation of redemptive action, baptism into obedience of the Father and love for the lost. "Jesus did not receive baptism as a confession of guilt on His own account. He identified Himself with sinners, taking the steps that we are to take, and doing the work that we must do."⁶¹ A new and important era was opening before Him. The baptism of Jesus indicated consecration to His vocation as the Messiah. His baptism anticipated, so to speak, His entire life, the moment of baptism right on to death.

Similarly, through the Christian's baptism, Christ incorporates him into His body and ordains him for participation in His ministry. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost is the counterpart of what happened to Jesus at His baptism. The same Spirit who remained in Jesus for Messianic ministry has, ever since Pentecost, dwelt in the church which is the temple of His body.

For Jesus, baptism meant that He was consecrated as Messiah. For us, baptism means that we are consecrated as the Messianic people. We are reminded: "As Christians submit to the solemn rite of baptism, He [Christ] registers the vow that they make to be true to Him. This vow is their oath of

60 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 6 (Mountain View, CA, 1948): 98-99.

61 White, *The Desire of Ages*, 111.

allegiance. They are baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus they are united with the three great powers of heaven.” “After the believing soul has received the ordinance of baptism, he is to bear in mind that he is dedicated to God, to Christ, and to the Holy Spirit.”⁶²

The life of which baptism is the starting point is a life “in Christ.” The Christian baptism anticipates his entire life. “Baptized into union with Him you have all put on Christ as a garment.” (Gal 3:23, NEB) Paul’s ethics are essentially the ethics of baptism. The one business of the Christian’s life is to realize, to give effect to, what was given to them in their baptism.

But is it legitimate to think of baptism as ordination into the priesthood of believers?

Baptism as Ordination

The phrase, *baptism as ordination*, does not appear in Scripture. Nor do we find any other phrases or patterns of thought which would directly suggest an opposition between the ideas of baptism and ordination. On the level of terminology this is not without explanation. **Whereas baptism in the NT is a special, technical term with approximately the same meaning in all strata of the NT, there is no similar defined, technical term in the NT which covers what is usually intended today by the English word “ordination,”** for example, entry into lifelong membership in a cast commissioned to preach the word and administer the sacraments. **It should be pointed out, that familiarity among English readers with the King James Version tends to color the whole subject of ordination. The translators of this version have used “ordain” for twenty-one different Hebrew and Greek words.⁶³ It is quite evident that seventeenth century ecclesiastical understanding influenced the choice of “ordain” in some of these instances. In 1 Timothy 2:7 Paul is said to have been “ordained” (*eiethen*) a preacher. This is the common verb (*tithemi*), to put or place. Also, our Lord is said to have “ordained” the twelve (Mark 3:14), but this is the verb *poiein*, to make or do. Modern translators avoid “ordain” in these instances but the influence of the old translation persists.** Further, anachronisms have not been entirely unavoidable, either. To speak, for example, of the ordination of Timothy in reference to the events of 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6 may, for the modern reader, introduce connotations not justified by the texts; ordination is, however, a brief and convenient way of speaking of these events. **The interpreter must exercise a certain caution lest the *description of events***

62 Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC, 1946, reprinted 1970), 307, 315.

63 See “Ordain,” *Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible*.

become confused with *prescriptions for church practice*.

In the oldest reflections of actual congregational life which we find in the NT, the idea of a distinction between ordained and unordained ministries is totally absent. Baptism as ordination is faithful to the understanding of the ministry which we see in these earliest communities. In 1 Corinthians, chapters 12, 13, and 14, the rich variety of ministries or function in the Corinth community is understood as being unified and ordered by the Spirit. And the rule and presence of the Spirit is closely associated with baptism:

Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit because all these parts, though many, make one body, so it is with Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptized, Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as citizens, and the one spirit was given to us all to drink. (1 Cor 12:12-13, *Jerusalem Bible*)

Immediately preceding this statement, Paul has listed ten gifts of the Spirit. Later in the same chapter, 1 Corinthians 12:28ff., he suggests some hierarchy of functions, "first apostles, second prophets, third teachers. . . ." But there is no hint that these functions could be assigned or empowered by any rite which might be called ordination. "Ordination," if by such is meant induction to service, is the privilege of all who name the name of Christ, and is signaled by the conversion-baptism experience.

In the NT we do not we set forms of ministry. The continuity between the OT priesthood and NT ministries is impossible to establish. In Acts 6:7 the priests who have become believers play no special role in the Christian community. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews strongly maintains discontinuity between Israel and the church with respect to priesthood (cf. Heb 5:6-10 and chap. 7). The most frequent mentioned reinterpretation of priesthood in the New Testament is perhaps 1 Peter 2:4ff. In Acts the number of the Twelve is filled up again. (Acts 1:15-26). But it is Peter and Paul, not the Twelve, who play determinative roles in Acts. The notion of what it means to be an apostle is in flux. It cannot be only the twelve who are apostles since Barnabus and Paul are both called apostles (Acts 14:14). This designation also strains the understanding of apostle as eyewitness without successor. Moreover, in Acts 13:13 Paul, already an apostle, is further commissioned. Even in the appointment of the deacons (cf. Acts 6:1-4 if in fact this is an etiological account for the later diaconate) there is no suggestion that a definite order is being established which will perpetuate itself.

Elders emerge in Acts 11:30 and on the occasion of the Apostolic Council play a leading role in the Jerusalem community. In Acts 14:23 elders are appointed for a Gentile group. Even in the one apparent reference to a bishop

in Acts (Acts 20:28) it may be argued that the function of oversight is intended rather than any title. If this is not true, then the reference to elders in Acts 20:17 is a title and we are moving toward some sort of set terminology here. But here, as in the case with the deacons, there is no suggestion that a self-perpetuating order is being set up. The practice of laying on of hands as it emerges in Luke is far from consistent and the meaning of the rite is ambiguous. In one instance it is accompanied by miraculous signs (Acts 8:17; 9:17, 18; 19:6), though often it is not (Acts 6:6; 13:3). In some texts the apostles lay on hands (Acts 8:17; 19:6; 2 Timothy 1:6); in others they do not (Acts 9:1-7; 13:1-3; 1 Tim 4:14) and who lays on hands is not conclusive (Acts 6:6; 13:3). The rite is variously associated with baptism (Acts 8:17; 19:6), the sacrifice of animals (Heb 6:2; 1 Tim 5:22), temporary ministry of a practical nature (Acts 6:6), itinerant evangelistic ministry, also temporary (Acts 13:3), and person-to-person mediatorship of a spiritual gift (2 Tim 1:6). In two enigmatic texts (Acts 9:10-19; 1 Tim 5:22), it is difficult to determine which of several possible circumstances underlie the rite. Apparently God could equip His servants with or without⁶⁴ the imposition of hands.

Though the reading of Luke may be open to question, there is little doubt that some formal ordering of the ministry is presupposed in the Pastorals. Yet here too, it is difficult to get a clear picture. Deacons and elders appear to be distinguished from each other, but the terms bishop and elder are used interchangeably. Even in the oft-quoted passages, 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6, the gift is spoken of in connection with the laying on of hands can hardly be understood as the gift of an *office* in the modern sense. What was given was a spiritual gift, a gift of power, love and self-control which must be exercised and stirred up.

Precisely where it is most to be expected, in the passages where it is stressed that worthy teachers must be appointed to carry on correct teaching (cf. 2 Tim 2:2 and Titus 1:5), no provision is made for subsequent laying on of hands. As Eduard Schweizer has pointed out, in the Pastorals it is primarily a matter of insuring Pauline tradition rather than of establishing succession.⁶⁵ Taken historically, these texts show that leadership patterns were emerging in the churches according to the needs of the multifarious communities, and were provided through the gifts given by the Holy Spirit.

64 Acts 6:1-6; 2 Tim 1:6; There is no record of hands being laid on any of the apostles (except Paul), or on Silas, Apollos, Titus, or others (with the exception of Barnabus who was teamed with Paul, Acts 13:1-3).

65 Eduard Schweizer, *Church and Order in the New Testament*, (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1961), 70-71.

The purpose of office was to facilitate the functioning of the churches as they sought to fulfill the gospel mandate in the society of their day. The Spirit did not provide the Corinthians with leaders identical in function to those he gave to the church at Ephesus.⁶⁶ Indeed, neither then nor now could the needs of a changing society be met for long with any pattern of office. **When the emerging patterns of office are extracted from their NT historical settings and made into a mold to shape the contours of ministry for all situations in all times, the result is a rigid church leadership that is unable to equip the saints or coordinate their gifts to cope with a changing society.**

The title, *baptism as ordination*, scores well in fidelity to the biblical witness. It asserts the sort of unity within diversity which is characteristic of the earlier patterns in the NT and by broadening the scope of ministry to all the baptized has indicated a choice of diversity and freedom rather than exclusivism.

Ordination to the Pastoral Office versus More General Ordination at Baptism

Now to the final question, does basic ordination at baptism exclude subsequent ordinations for special tasks? Zwingli made a careful distinction between the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the office of the preacher.⁶⁷ Luther also affirmed “that everyone coming out of baptism is consecrated to be a priest”, **but also admitted that some are specifically set apart to preach, administer the sacraments and to be shepherds of the flock of Christ.**⁶⁸ The fact that everyone has the right to preach the gospel does not mean that everyone should do it. If everyone preached by word the result would be cliques, parties and factions, as is shown in 1 Corinthians. Moreover if everyone preached without authorization from anyone, it would not be the gospel that they preached. Some, therefore, are specifically called to fulfill this task, and always they are representatives of the universal priesthood. They are the focus of the spiritual activity of the faithful.

An illustration from Luther will help us to understand the relation between the universal priesthood and its representatives. “When a minister is chosen it is as though ten brothers, all king’s sons and equal heirs, were to choose one of themselves to rule the inheritance for them all. . . . They would all be kings and equal in power, though one of them would be charged with the duty of ruling.”⁶⁸

66 Cf. 1 Cor 12:27-31; Eph 4:11, 12; Rom 12:3-8 are representative lists.

67 Jean Rilliet, *Zwingli*, (Philadelphia, 1964), 186.

68 B. Lee Woolf, *Reformation Writing*, I. 114.



Like Luther, this author believes that it is both possible and necessary to distinguish between a believer priesthood and a clerical priesthood, the latter being persons who have been “set apart” through a special ordination for a special task. “Paul, the servant of Jesus Christ, apostle by God’s call, set apart for the service of the gospel.” (Rom 1:1; cf. Gal 1:15) Such a setting apart happens also for specific tasks which need not necessarily imply a life-long ministry. Thus the Holy Spirit said to the congregation in Antioch, “set Barnabas and Saul apart for me to do the work to which I call them.” (Acts 13:2) Here the purpose of being set apart is clear: Both God’s people as a whole and certain persons within it are set apart for a mission and service according to the call of God. Setting apart then means to “delegate” to “commission.” It is not so much a setting apart *from* as a setting apart *within* and *for*. There is no set apart, ordained, apostolic, charismatic, and sacrificial ministers within a people which would not share all these attributes and functions. There are only set apart ministers within a set apart people, specially ordained ministers within the people which has received the general ordination of baptism. Lamentably, special ordination means too often not setting apart *within* and *for* the ordained people or the baptized, but setting *over above* and *apart from* the laity. The NT knows only Christ set over the church. Even overseers have been set *in* the church, not *over* it (Acts 20:28). Nor does the NT teach that some Christians represent the Son of God and some do not. As we have seen, all are referred to as the “laity of God” (1 Pet 2:10). Stewardship of the Word is not portrayed as the exclusive right of a clerical cast (1 Pet 2:9; 3:15). There are about thirty words in the NT that describe the activity of spreading the gospel: proclaim, announce, teach, explain, speak, testify, confess, persuade, preach, and admonish are only a few of them.⁶⁹ There is no way these can be rigidly segregated into public and private categories. The different kinds of “preaching” allow everyone to make his contribution toward the proclamation of the gospel. When this is permitted to happen the results are exciting. However, if we set an ecclesiastical elite *over* the people of God we cannot avoid creating a third priesthood functioning between Christ and the believers in whose hands is the work of the ministry.

In the New Testament, Church leaders are never called “rulers,” but many translators do not hesitate to use the word for them (cf. Heb 13:7, KJV). The subtleties of the Greek are destroyed in this translation. There is a difference in being told to “obey your rulers” and being exhorted to be persuaded by your rulers. The result of either approach may be the same, namely, obedience to

69 F. F. Bruce, *Tradition Old and New*, (Grand Rapids, 1970), 65).



leaders. However, the vocabulary of the Greek New Testament permits the believer the dignity of responsible and intelligent response; blind obedience to human leadership is not required of those in the Christian community. Elders who “rule well” (1 Tim 5:17) are really elders who have been placed *before* their congregations to lead, *not over them* to rule. Even the apostle Paul, called for an unique mission by God and given apostolic authority never sets himself up above the lowliest saint (Eph 3:8; Gal 1:2). First Thessalonians 5:12 reads: “but we beseech you brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.” Here, too, the nuances of the Greek have been lost in translation. “Those who are over you” are the *proistamenous*, the ones set before you; this participle stresses the function of several, not the office of one. The word for “admonish” is *nouthetein*, an appeal to the *nous*, the faculty of understanding and intelligent judgment. The tone of the word can be derived from its use in Acts 20:31 where Paul describes his appeal in the gospel as “tearful”; or in 1 Corinthians 4:14 where he entreats the Corinthians as he would entreat much loved children. It would suggest an appeal in love, not the deliverance of an authoritative edict. The language of NT leadership is a language of horizontal relationships, of leading and following, of voluntary submission and service to one another. Even the risen Lord, the head of the church, who is in the “heavenlies” and is “far above all rule and authority” (Eph 1:21), is, in relation to the Church, said to build it (Matt 16:18), give gifts to all (Eph 4:11), bestow grace on it (2 Cor 8:1), nourish it (Eph 5:29), love it (Eph 5:25), and by giving Himself for it, sanctify it (Eph 5:25-26). He has set the pattern of service for us to emulate. It is by this criteria that we must test our doctrine of ministry and in so doing evaluate the practice of ordination.

Perhaps this title, baptism as ordination will serve to give us a new perspective to traditional patterns of ministry and will facilitate their transformation rather than their abolition. Further, the slogan, will serve to keep before us the basic unity of the people of God and the inseparability of set-apart minister and the peoplehood. As F. Roy Coad remarks,

. . . the ideal is that every member of the church should have his or her function within that life and witness made plain, then recognition becomes the open acknowledgement by the congregation of the formal place of each of its members. In this way the churches can be *revolutionized a partnership of grace* in which every member has his or her own function to fulfill, without jealousy or frustration, and where the Holy Spirit will weld individual gifts of the many into a united testimony to His power.⁷⁰

70 F. Roy Coad, *History of the Brethren Movement*, 2nd ed. (Exeter, 1976), 270.

The phrase baptism does not appear in Scripture, but it is a forceful affirmation of the mission of the whole people of God. The phrase asserts that baptism is not only initiation into God's people, but also the basic commissioning into Christ's ministry. It implies that baptism is the fundamental call to Christian priesthood and that all subsequent summons to priestly activity are dependent upon this primary call.⁷¹ It leaves free room for the recognition of charisma in the life of the Christian community. It takes seriously both the ministry of people to each other within their own community of faith as well as their ministry of service to the world as agents of altruistic deeds and proclaimers of the "good news." Only the recovery of the full meaning of baptism can save from irrelevance our talk about the ministry.

Conclusion

The Church's paramount work is set forth by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:18, "and all things are of God, who has reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation." We must remember that the word "us" in both parts of the sentence refers to all Christians. There is no exemption permitted, for we are all of us committed to and involved in this universal mission. Will not a full realization of the obligations of our priesthood revolutionize our attitude to all our work for Christ and His kingdom? It is the plain duty of the royal priesthood to bring mankind to a knowledge of its spiritual inheritance. When the church awakens to the full implications of this doctrine, the "universal priesthood" will no longer be an interesting speculation but a universal fate. A task that is cosmic in its dimensions is too urgent to be neglected. So Origen's words are a timely reminder to us all:

The apostles and they that are made like unto the apostles, being priest after the order of the great High Priest, have received the knowledge of the worship of God and being instructed by the Spirit, are sent out to enlighten those who dwell in darkness and to bring them into the secret of the knowledge of Christ.⁷²

71 A pattern of thought very much like this is to be found in Thomas Aquinas. Discussing the sacramental character imputed to the Christian at baptism, Thomas says: "The whole rite of the Christian religion is derived from Christ's priesthood. Consequently, it is clear that the sacramental character is specially the character of Christ, to whose priesthood the faithful are likened by reason of the sacramental characters, which are nothing else than certain participation of Christ's priesthood, flowing from Christ Himself." St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.* 3. q.63, a. 3.

72 Origen, *De Oratione*, 28.