

THE PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS

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I. How would you define the priesthood of believers? Have you heard this expression before? In what context?

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (I Peter 2:9)

The priesthood of all believers is something most of us know just enough about to be dangerous. That doesn’t stop us from using and misusing the concept in our thinking, writing and speaking as Lutheran Christians.

What is the “priesthood of all believers?” The term refers to one of the catch-phrases that emerged from the 16th century Reformation of the church, led by Martin Luther (1483-1546) and his followers.

We sometimes mistakenly regard these catch-phrases as if they were advertising slogans in a media campaign. In reality, the term “priesthood of all believers” was a product of the *polemical* situation that was the Reformation. In short, these were originally fighting words, employed by Luther and company in the verbal fisticuffs that were part-and-parcel of their efforts at renewing the church.

II. Why would an idea like “priesthood of believers” be ‘fighting words?’ What is at stake? Who would be concerned about this idea?

Like most Reformation catch-phrases, “priesthood of all believers” stood over against something the reformers were attacking or trying to change. Specifically, the *universal priesthood* put forth by the

reformers was offered in direct contradiction to the *special priesthood* that stood at the heart of medieval Catholicism.

The church in Luther’s day viewed priests as members of a distinct order of Christians. Priests were understood to have acquired a unique identity—an *indelible character*—that permanently set them apart from the laity. This unique identity reflected the special powers that bishops conferred on priests in their *ordination*, which was considered one of the seven sacraments of the church. By virtue of their ordination, only priests could preside at the sacraments and perform other churchly rituals.

In 1520—just three years after the

III. What do you think happens in ordination? Does it change a person? If so, how? What is the difference between a lay person and an ordained person?

start of the Reformation—Luther challenged this medieval understanding of priesthood. In the place of a special priesthood occupied by only a few chosen ones by virtue of their ordination, Luther developed the concept of the priesthood of all believers by virtue of baptism.

“Whoever comes out of the water of baptism,” Luther wrote in his treatise *To the Christian Nobility* (1520), “can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop and pope.” This audacious statement undermined the three-tiered clerical hierarchy that was the foundation of the Catholic Church’s entire sacramental system.

Luther demolished the notion that clergy are a breed apart, a different order of Christians unlike common lay folk.

“There is no true, basic difference between

Ordination

- In the medieval church, ordination conferred special powers upon the priest. Among them was the ability to make Christ present in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.
- The Reformers taught that Baptism was the only ordination necessary.

laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between the religious and secular,” he wrote, “except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, are all truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do.”

In the water of Baptism, all believers are ordained and empowered to do the work of the priesthood. All believers are called and equipped to lead lives of prayer, sacrificial service and proclamation of God’s Word.

Luther and the reformers did not abolish the ministry of Word and Sacrament, however. They recognized the importance—indeed, the divine institution—of an *office* whereby the preaching of the gospel, the administration of baptism and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper would continue to create and sustain faith in Jesus Christ. But the occupants of this office were not understood by the reformers to be fundamentally different from laity. What matters is not their identity but their work, their *function*. Pastors are called out from among the priests of God to serve these priests with the gifts of God—thereby equipping them for their varied priestly ministries in God’s world.

Tragically, the Lutheran church of today has

IV. What is the difference between recognizing the importance of the office of ministry and thinking of clergy as a separate class? What is the difference between a person’s identity and their function?

largely lost this bracing vision of the awesome power and responsibility that comes to us in our baptism into Christ. What might it mean for us today to recover an understanding and appreciation of the priesthood of all believers?

There are some things this should *not* mean. The priesthood of all believers should not be used as a fancy term for anti-clericalism. No good is served by driving wedges between laity and their pastors. The priesthood of all believers isn’t synonymous with “prairie populism” or any other form of democratic egalitarianism.

Nor should we imagine that recovering the priesthood of all believers means that everything Christians do can and must be labeled “ministry.” When everything one does is ministry, nothing actually ends up being ministry.

Moreover, the priesthood of all believers isn’t primarily about how one gains access to God. Careless Lutherans sometimes say: “In the Middle Ages, people thought they needed a priest to stand between themselves and God. We know better. We are the priesthood of all believers—we have direct access to God. Every baptized man or woman is his/her own priest.”

This way of putting it gets it exactly wrong. We

V. What’s wrong with this understanding? Don’t we have direct access to God?

aren’t *our own* priests. We are priests, precisely *for the sake of one another*. And this leads us to consider what recovery of the priesthood of all believers might mean for the 21st century church.

In Holy Baptism all believers are ordained to a life of priestly service *on behalf of their neighbors*. What shape might such priestly service take?

First, believers will exercise the priestly ministry of *prayer*. Indeed, we render one another no greater service than when we lift up one another before God’s throne of grace—in all the circumstances of life, the joys and the pains, the happiness and the sorrow.

Second, believers will offer *sacrificial service* to their neighbors. To be sure, Christ and Christ alone has offered to God the all-sufficient sacrifice of himself “once for all” (Hebrews 7:27). It is precisely Christ’s sacrificial self-giving that liberates us to follow suit with respect to our neighbors.

In a classic passage Luther put it this way:

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all....Although the Christian is thus free from all works [for salvation], he ought in this liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be found in human form [Phi. 2:5-11], and serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him.”

Third, believers will *serve the Word of God*, exercising their right and responsibility to proclaim this Word in the world. Members of the priesthood of all believers, in their daily lives, will always be ready to account for the hope that is in them (I Peter 3:15). In the corporate life of the church on earth, members of the priesthood also exercise their ministry to the Word by examining, calling, supporting their pastors—and holding them accountable to the Word of God.

The priesthood of believers is not about everyone being their own priest. Rather, we are priests for the sake of one another.

VI. How can people hold their pastors accountable to the Word of God?