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Title: The Priesthood of Believers and the Divine Service

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With the exception of the biblical doctrine of justification, perhaps no biblical teaching is more dear to the hearts of Lutherans than the priesthood of all believers. Recent discussion of this biblical teaching has spoken of the priesthood of all believers in terms of church activity, evangelism, and lay participation in public worship, e.g., reading the lessons and assisting at the distribution of Holy Communion.

To say that all believers are priests is not the same as saying that everyone is a minister. The word "minister" has traditionally been reserved for those persons called to serve the priesthood in the pastoral office. This brief article will relate the priesthood of believers to the divine service, understanding the divine service as the chief parochial service, whether on Sunday morning or at some other time during the week.

The Priesthood Is Not a Collection of Individuals

The priesthood is more than a collection of individuals; it is a "chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, a people purchased to be God's possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). A race is more than a collection of individuals. A race has identity which is derived from a common ancestry. You cannot join a race, you are born into it. The chosen race has a Father in heaven and a mother on earth-Holy Church. Her members are born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). Their mother is the holy and pure bride of Christ, the Church (Gal. 4:26; Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 12:1,5,6; Is. 66:8,9). This race is a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5) in the sense of the royal "house" or lineage. They are the true "seed of Abraham" (Gal. 3:27,29).

The priesthood is a "people purchased as God's own possession" and thus they are the Lord's heritage among all the peoples of the earth (Ps. 2:8; 28:8,9; 33:12; 78:62,71; 94:5,14). They are a people, not in the sense of a crowd of individuals, but a society, a community. They are distinct as a people and their distinctiveness is that God has purchased them and thus made them a people who belong to him. He has made a covenant with them (Deut. 4:7; Jer. 31:33), a New Covenant in the blood of Christ (Matt. 26:27,28; Mark 15:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). They were "formerly not a people" but are "now the people of God" (1 Pet. 2:10). God dwells among them (Ex. 29:46; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Cor. 3:16; Ezek. 37:26,27).

Individual members of the priesthood receive their identity when the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is put upon them. The nature and character of the royal priesthood is that of a community or society. The identity of each member of the priesthood is determined by his or her relationship to the community in which God lives with his Spirit (Eph. 2:22). In contrast to idolatrous baalism, paganism, animistic religions, and gnosticism, both ancient and modern, no one can know or belong to God as an isolated individual. The worship of the community of the priesthood is not a crowd of individuals coming together, each to have his own religious experience.

The royal priesthood are a holy priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5), a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9). The holiness of the priesthood is not a result of their own achievement or work. God clothes his priests with righteousness, their vestment which makes them holy (Ex. 28; Ps. 132:9). The holiness of the priests is Christ himself, his righteousness, purity, perfect obedience. The priests are clothed with Christ, "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). God makes his priests holy so that they are fit to serve him. Priests must be holy in order to have access to God. Whoever enters into the presence of God without the priestly vestment will die (Ex. 28:43). The old collect or the communicants recognizes this and prays, "...take off from them the spotted garment of the flesh and their own righteousness and clothe them with the garment of righteousness purchased with Thy blood."

For the Sake of the World

The root of the word for holy in Hebrew is a word meaning to cut or separate. The priesthood is separated from sin and from the race of Adam to serve God. "Let my people go that they may serve me" (Ex. 7:16; 8:1; 8:20; 9:1). As God used the waters of the sea to rescue Israel from their bondage, they "...all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Cor. 10:2); so in the water of baptism God redeems his royal priesthood from the bondage of sin, Satan, and death, in order that they might serve him. They are separated, set apart, sanctified, consecrated to the service of God for the sake of the world. Through baptism they share in Christ's resurrection (Rom. 6:4,5). "Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ" (Rev. 20:6).

In the royal priesthood the whole of human race is represented before God. This priesthood is to "bring them to continual remembrance before the Lord" (Ex. 28:29). The royal priesthood enters into the presence of God in order to offer intercession, prayers, thanksgiving, and praise to God on behalf of all the children of Adam and of all creation. Together with "angels and archangels and all the company of heaven" they offer praise and thanksgiving (Rev. 5:8-14).

The royal priesthood stands in the presence of men and women as representative of God. They offer their bodies as a "living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1) in their daily work and station in life for the sake of the world. At baptism three divine "mysteries" (hidden wisdom) are given to each member of the priesthood. They are given the Ten Commandments as the priestly rule of discipline, the Apostles' Creed as their doxology and confession, and the Our Father as their priestly prayer of intercession. The Ten Commandments describe the holy life to be lived for the sake of the world. The priests are salt and light for the world (Matt. 5:13,14). By lives lived according to his hidden wisdom, they fulfill their priestly calling to mediate the presence of God to the world.

The second divine mystery given to members of the priesthood at baptism is a doxology and confession, the Apostles' Creed. With these words the priesthood says to the baptized, "This is how you must speak about God so that you do not tell lies about him.

You must speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These words are entrusted to you so that the world may learn to know the only God who is." The prophet Malachi says, "For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts" (2:7). To confess means to say the same thing about God which God has said about himself (Matt. 16:17). Such is always doxology. Doxology means to glorify and praise God, "to declare the wonderful deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). To praise God means to speak of what God has done. The Creed summarizes all that the Trinity has done in the past, is presently doing, and will do in the future. This confession and doxology is given to the members of the priesthood for the sake of the world.

The Importance of the Divine Service in the Formation of the Priesthood

In contrast to that sort of gnostic religion where each individual seeks his or her own spirituality, the members of the priesthood are always formed and shaped as citizens of the "holy nation," the people whom God has purchased as his own inheritance. God forms and shapes his priesthood, which is why the chief worship activity of the priesthood is called the divine service. God serves his priesthood by continually renewing their holiness.

The holiness of the priesthood is continually put upon them as an alien righteousness. It is never the consequence of their life or achievement. To say it in traditional terms, the holiness of the believer is not his sanctification, but the imputed righteousness of Christ, on account of which all sins are forgiven to those who believe. The knowledge of sin is taught to each member of the priesthood by the Ten Commandments (Rom. 3:20).

When the priesthood gathers in the divine service the Chief Priest, Christ, is present among them to serve them. He does so through the called servant, their minister. The Chief Priest serves his priesthood by granting them absolution, or forgiveness. The called servant of the Word speaks by the command of Christ. The absolution is true absolution before God in heaven (Matt. 16:19). Since the practice of private confession and absolution has fallen into disuse among us, the general confession was introduced into the divine service. However, a return to the practice of personal confession and absolution ought to be urgently pursued.

The priesthood gathers to listen to the word which God speaks through his prophets (Old Testament), through the Apostles of Christ (Epistles), through his Son (Gospels), and through their minister. The Holy Spirit instructs and forms the priesthood through the forgiveness of sins given through the Gospel, the Holy Supper, and the word preached by his minister.

The gathering of the priesthood at the divine service is for the sake of the world. This priesthood comes to offer to God the praise and thanksgiving which is due from all creation. Praise is not an individual activity, carried out in private. "I will tell of your name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you" (Ps. 22:22). These words are from the psalm which the Chief Priest prayed from the cross. The sacrifice of praise which the priesthood brings to God (Heb. 13:13) is an activity of the gathered priesthood. Praise and thanksgiving is the telling of God's deeds (Ps. 9:11). The Creed is the doxology and confession of the priesthood; it is not a subjective statement of private belief. No one has the privilege of substituting a more "personal" confession.

St. Paul describes the Lord's Supper as an act of praise and thanksgiving. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26). The act of eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ is in itself the proclaiming of his death. This is not a religious "cocktail hour" to enjoy in another's company. The wonderful deeds which God has done, are done for the priesthood as they eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. "This is my body...my blood...for you for the forgiveness of sins." The priesthood proclaims to the world that our holiness, our righteousness, is a work of God through the death and resurrection of his Son. Those who neglect or despise this sacrament proclaim by their absence that they believe salvation and eternal life is a result of their own achievement and work. Eating and drinking in this sacrament is the stubborn and defiant proclamation that God has broken and destroyed the powers of Satan, sin, death, and hell, for us. In the face of suffering, pain, disease, persecution, loneliness, sin, death, and hell the priesthood raises the "terrible toast of joy."

The priesthood gathers to offer intercession for all sorts and conditions of men. The priests were taught to pray the Our Father as intercessory and priestly prayer. The prayers offered by the chosen race bring all the race of Adam to God in continual remembrance (1 Tim. 2:1-4). Their prayer is offered for the sake of the world, since "God would have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth."

Ritual as the Primary Means of Formation

No aspect of the corporate life of a community is more important than its public rituals. Cultic life sustains and transmits the community's identity, way of life, and values. No people can exist as a community without cultic life. The importance of ritual for sustaining identity and securing loyalty is clearly understood by youth gangs whose ritual is mandatory for membership.

In order to accomplish this end, ritual must be stereotyped and orderly. A ritual which changes continually utterly fails to sustain the life of the chosen race, the holy nation. The explicit instructions given to Israel for its cultic life and rituals in the Old Testament are intended to give form and shape to them as a distinct and holy people. They are identified as a people by their rituals, and the God whom they worship is also identified. Their cultic life was the way in which they were continually reminded that they belonged to the God who had made them his "purchased possession," a peculiar people.

The only divine mandate given for the ritual of the holy priesthood is the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the ritual of the divine service are essential, some of which have been mentioned above. one

aspect of the public ritual, however, is primary. The ritual must identify the Trinity whom the priesthood serves. The name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit identifies the community that gathers as the royal priesthood. This name was given them and placed on them at their baptism. The word "god" is a generic term. The God who speaks in the first commandment names himself for us in the divine command to baptize. This is the God whom the priesthood confesses in the Creed. The substitutions of other language for the divine name, such as "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier" is not a name, but a description of divine activity.

The very nature of the priesthood precludes making this gathering a marketing tool to increase the membership of the organization. When the public ritual becomes "meaningful" to people without faith in God, it is false ritual, a betrayal of the priestly gathering, and a betrayal of the God who has chosen them as his own purchased possession. It is idolatrous.

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