

STUDIES FOR ROLE OF WOMEN COMMISSION

***The Priesthood of Believers:**

by

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THE PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS

"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 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 on of 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 documents of Vatican II where 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 soul-winning." 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

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.

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- ¹ E. Glenn Hinson, The Church: Design for Survival (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1967), p. 95.
 - ² Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, vol. 4, p. 1159.
 - ³ Your Other Vocation (New York: Harper & Bros., 1952), p. 30.
 - ⁴ T. W. Manson, Ministry and Priesthood: Christ and Ours (The Epworth Press, 1958), p. 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: Oliver and Boyd, 1955), p. 35, n.1.
 - ⁵ Apostolic Constitutions, III.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), pp. 225-241, art. "The Ordination Controversy and the Spirit of Reform in Puritan England."
 - ⁸ Quoted by Jaroslav Pelikan, Spirit Versus Structure (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 13.
 - ⁹ Martin Luther, "An Appeal to the Ruling Class (1520)," quoted in Lewis W. Spitz, The Protestant Reformation, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 54.
 - 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, Acts of the Apostles (Pacific Press, 1950), p. 355.
 - ¹² Quoted in Horton Davies, The English Free Churches (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 133.
 - ¹³ Robert W. Burtner and Robert E. Chiles, A Compend of Wesley's Theology, (New York: Abingdon, 1954), p. 262, quoting from Wesley's Works, "A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," III.10,12.

I. 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" (Revelation 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." (Exodus 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.

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 Old Testament. In the Septuagint, laos is used with amazing consistency to translate the Hebrew word am (people), which itself is employed in the Old Testament almost exclusively as a designation of Israel. When non-Israelite peoples are mentioned in the Old Testament, 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).

(1) 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.

(2) Laity: People of God in the New Testament

It is this theological meaning of laos which passes from the Old Testament, by way of the Septuagint, into the New Testament when the term is used with reference to both the Israel of old and the new Israel, the Christian community (Galatians 6:16). The most remarkable affirmation of this continuity between the New Testament community of faith and that of the Old Testament 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 Old Testament 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 Romans 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 New Testament 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 Corinthians 5:18-19).

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. ¹

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." ² 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 New Testament. 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 (verse 11). He then describes their work as being "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (verse 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." ³

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.

(3) 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." ⁴ 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" (Romans 12:1) to be instruments of redemption as they "show forth the

praises of Him who hath called" them "out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 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."⁵ 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."⁶ However, the tendency toward institutionalism in this area is recognized, for he says that by the end of the second century⁷ the office of bishop had become "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."⁸

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 consequences 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." 9

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- 1 William Robinson, Completing the Reformation (Lexington: The College of the Bible, 1955), pp. 19-20.
 - 2 Ibid., p. 17.
 - 3 Ibid., p. 21.
 - 4 Paul S. Minear, Images of the Church in the New Testament (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 100.
 - 5 J. B. Lightfoot, The Christian Ministry (London: Macmillan and Company Ltd., 1901), p. 6.
 - 6 T. W. Manson, op. cit., p. 44 [emphasis his].
 - 7 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