

The Priesthood of 'No' Believer?



1

What the Doctrine Is (And Is Not)

Not “the priesthood of each believer”
as isolated individuals.

Priesthood belongs to the church
corporately as the body of Christ.

The question is first theological (what
is the church?), not organisational
(who is allowed to do what?).

2

Christ the Only Priest

In the New Testament, the term *hiereus* (priest) is applied in the singular only to Jesus Christ (besides Jewish temple priests).

Christ's priesthood is unique, eternal, and patterned after Melchizedek, not the Aaronic/Levitical order.

His priesthood "completes" and universalizes priesthood for all peoples.

3

From Israel to the Church

Exodus 19:5–6: Israel is called a "priestly kingdom and a holy nation" for the sake of the whole earth.

New Testament corporate images (1 Peter 2) are a recovery and expansion of this: the church as a priestly people for the world.

The church now shares in this vocation, not replacing Israel but participating in a priesthood with a universal scope.

4

Baptism and a New Priesthood

Baptism is the key symbol of transformed identity, surpassing even ordination and marriage in significance.

God uses ordinary water to signify union with Christ and adoption by the Father in the Spirit.

Every baptized person is set apart as holy and participates in a new priesthood of consecration and thanksgiving (Leithart). Baptism is the primary calling of every Christian.

Peter J. Leithart, *Baptism: A Guide to Life from Death*, Christian Essentials (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021).

5

Charismata and the Whole People of God

The Spirit distributes gifts (charismata) to all members of the church; there are no members without a gift (Volf).

Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991)

This rules out a strict division between those who serve and those who are served.

Gifts are universally given, interdependent, and allotted as the Spirit chooses, creating mutual responsibility and mutual subordination.

6

Everyone as Active Participants

Can Word and sacrament theology result in sidelining the non-ordained into passivity?

A theology of Word and sacrament must include the active, gifted ministry of all believers.

See the discussion in Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM Press, 2019). For example chapter 7, “The Priestly Church”, 208-231.

The whole people of God are participants in God’s self-giving through varied gifts and the communion of saints.

7

The Church’s Priesthood: Participation, *Not* *Competition*

The church’s priesthood is wholly derivative: it exists only as the church participates in Christ’s priesthood.

Christ is priest by nature and forever; the church is priestly only as a corporate body “in Christ” by the Spirit.

Everything said of “ministry” in the New Testament is said of the whole body, not an elite group (Robinson).

1 Peter 2: believers are “living stones” built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.

Priesthood expresses the unity and singular identity of the church as one “race” or people.

One cannot be a priest for oneself; priesthood is intrinsically relational—to God and to others.

8

A Communal Priesthood:

1. Sociality and Mutual Ministry

This and the following motifs are derived from Tom Greggs, "The Priesthood of No Believer: On the Priesthood of Christ and His Church," *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2015), pp. 374-398.

Priesthood defines the church's **social** life: a community that ministers God to one another and one another to God.

The church is a "nation of priests within the world," ordered for mutual service, intercession, and worship.

Internal life is structured around existence for the other, not for the self.

9

A Communal Priesthood:

2. Ministry for the World

The church exists not for itself but for the world.

It worships God on behalf of all creation, offering praise and thanksgiving as a priestly nation.

It mediates: bringing the world's concerns to God in prayer, and God's concerns to the world in proclamation.

10

A Communal Priesthood: 3. Witness

The church witnesses to God's covenant with creation in Christ.

It points to a reality already present in Christ into which all creation will be drawn.

As a body, the church is "a sign of the sign": it participates in Christ's own witnessing activity.

11

A Communal Priesthood: 4. Blessing and Shalom

The Aaronic blessing ministry is universalized in Christ and extended to the world.

The church is called to bless and to enact God's peace (*shalom*: wholeness, prosperity, health, completeness).

Priestly ministry is not primarily to accuse but to intercede and to offer God's blessing to both church and world.

12

A Communal Priesthood: 5. Sacrifice and Martyrdom

The church's sacrificial life is not ongoing expiation, but participation in Christ's wounded, given body.

Sacrifice is an intensive form of living for the other, even to the point of death (martyrdom as "witness").

Everyday sacrifices of time, money, status, and power are partial reflections of this ultimate priestly sacrifice.

13

A Communal Priesthood: 6. Sin-Bearing

The church bears sin not just individually but corporately, recognizing the deeply social nature of sin (Bonhoeffer).

It confesses "our" sins together and intercedes for the sins of the world, after the pattern of Moses.

By acknowledging the world's guilt as its own, the church opens up the possibility of forgiveness for the world.

14

Implications for Ministry and Polity

The church's life cannot be organized solely around "official ministers."

Ordained offices remain important but are relativized by the universal priesthood and gifting of the whole people of God.

Structures should serve the church's priestly vocation: unity, mutual ministry, mission, witness, blessing, and sin-bearing for the world.

15

Enabling mission practice?

This is a key leadership competency.

What does it mean for you?
What might it mean for the focus of your governance?

16

Enabling, but also receiving and serving

In considering the corporate ministry of all believers we are led to transcend a focus on vocational witness only.

Enabling, but also receiving and serving.

The ministry of the whole people of God is as much in the *abiding* as the *going*.

See Michael Gorman, *Abide and Go: Mission Theosis in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

17

Summary: The Church as Priestly People

Priesthood is corporate: the church as a whole shares in Christ's priesthood by the Spirit.

This priesthood is expressed through unity, mutual service, mission to the world, sacrificial love, and bearing the world's sins before God.

The doctrine calls the church to exist for God and for others, embodying a different kind of social and political life in the world.

18