

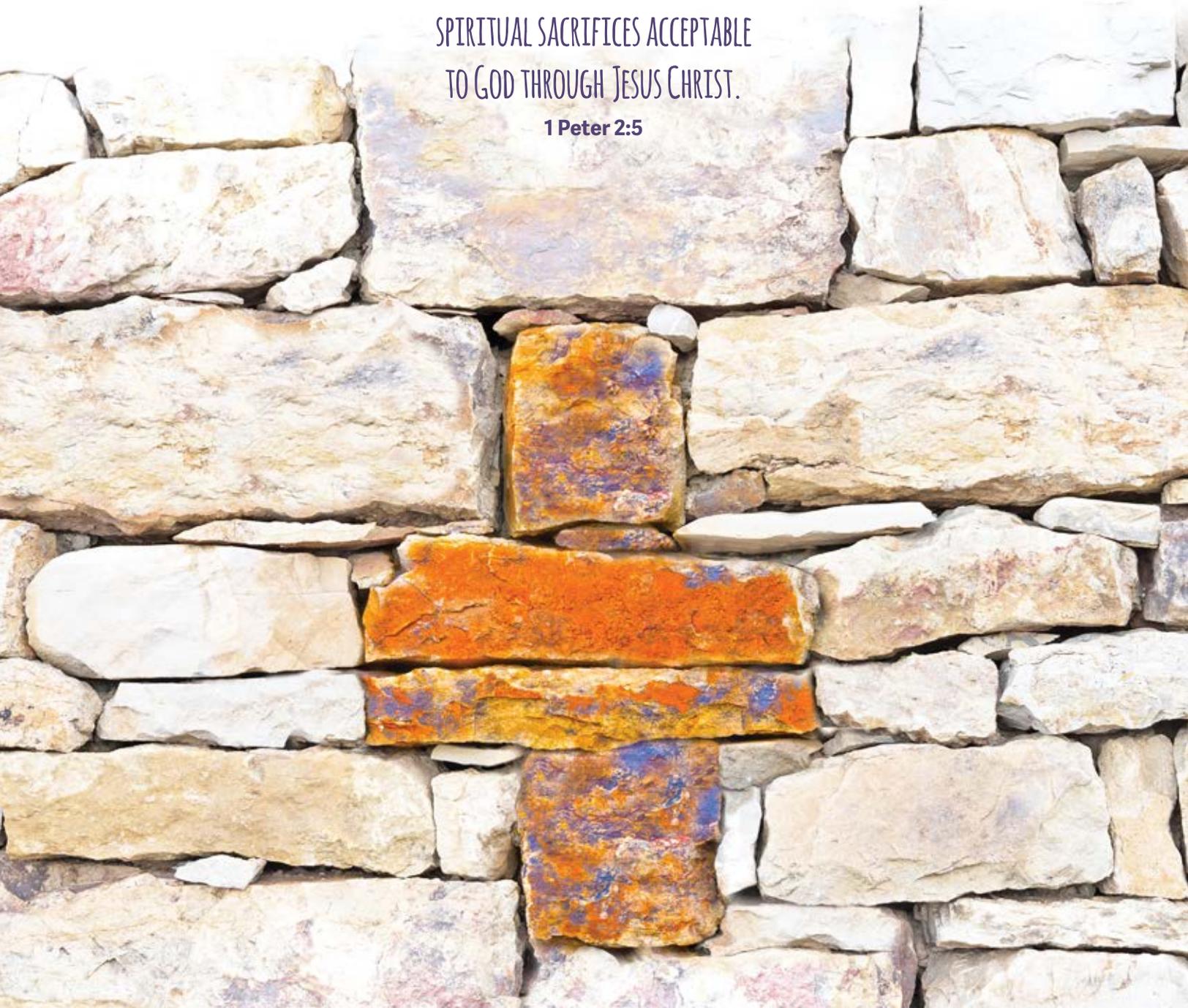
THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND CHURCH RELATIONS
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

THE ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

IDENTITY AND MISSION
DISCUSSION GUIDE AND BIBLE STUDY

YOU YOURSELVES LIKE LIVING STONES
ARE BEING BUILT UP AS A SPIRITUAL HOUSE,
TO BE A HOLY PRIESTHOOD, TO OFFER
SPIRITUAL SACRIFICES ACCEPTABLE
TO GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.

— 1 Peter 2:5



THE ROYAL PRIESTHOOD:

IDENTITY AND MISSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE AND BIBLE STUDY

This discussion guide and Bible study is based on the 2018 report, *The Royal Priesthood: Identity and Mission*, produced by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod¹

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

What comes to mind when you think of an Old Testament priest? How would you define the word “priest”?

God freed His people from slavery in Egypt. Then, at Mount Sinai, before the LORD gave His Law or established the Levitical priesthood, He declared His intention for all Israel to be His priests. He said to Moses:

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: “You yourselves 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 indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex. 19:4–6)

Scripture presents the priest as a mediator between God and man.² The priest had certain duties to fulfill.

Read Heb. 5:1 and Lev. 6:1–7. What are priests to do according to these verses? **Read 1 Sam. 7:5; Ezra 9:5–9 and Heb. 5:7.** In these verses what priestly work is carried out? **Read Mal. 2:7 and 2 Kings 17:26–28.** What priestly duty is mentioned in these verses? **Read Gen. 14:17–20.** Who is this priest — the first in the Bible to be identified by that title — and what does he do?

¹ The report is available for download from the CTCR website at lcms.org/ctcr.

² The English word “priest” is derived from the Greek word *presbyter* by way of Latin and then German.

The first priest mentioned by that title in Scripture is the mysterious Melchizedek, “priest of God Most High,” who blessed Abram in God’s name and brought him bread and wine (GEN. 14:17–20). Then he disappears, but we will meet him again.

As the priesthood unfolds through the Old Testament, it is a work of mediation, of offering gifts and sacrifices for sin, of supplication and prayer and of proclaiming God’s Word. Martin Luther summarizes the biblical duties of a priest:

According to the way the Scriptures picture him, a priest is a person whom God has ordained and commanded to mediate between God and men. That is to say, *a priest comes from God and brings us His Word and doctrine; again, he presents himself to God to sacrifice and pray for us.* Hence the priestly office consists of three parts: to teach or preach God’s Word, to sacrifice, and to pray. All three of these functions are abundantly referred to in the Scriptures.³

These three duties of sacrifice, prayer and proclamation are carried out long before Sinai, before the declaration of Israel’s royal priesthood and before the establishment of the Levitical priesthood. Adam and Eve served as priests before God. Luther, speaking of Gen. 4:3, says: “In the first place, we are reminded here that Adam and

³ Martin Luther, “Sermon on Psalm 110,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 13, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 315, emphasis added.

Eve, as pious parents, preached often and much to their children about the will and worship of God, inasmuch as both bring an offering to God.”⁴ Luther also draws a direct connection to the priesthood: “Adam and Eve are not only parents, nor do they merely provide for their children and educate them for this present life; but *they also perform the office of priests*. Inasmuch as they are filled with the Holy Spirit and are enlightened by the knowledge of Christ, who is to come, they set before their children this very hope of a future deliverance and exhort them to show their gratitude to so merciful a God. It is evident that the sacrifices which were handed down had no other purpose.”⁵

Throughout the book of Genesis, God’s people were involved in priestly work, although they did not bear the title “priest.” They gave thank offerings, prayed and proclaimed the works of God. They interceded for others and handed His blessing and promises down to the following generations.

Read Gen. 4:1–4 and Gen. 8:20–22. In these verses, what priestly work is done, and by whom is it done? **Read Gen. 18:16–33; Gen. 20:17 and Gen. 22:10–14.** What priestly tasks does Abraham carry out in these verses? **Read Gen. 27:22–29 and Gen. 49:1–12.** What priestly tasks are performed by Isaac and Jacob?

Called by Grace to Be Priests

Although God applied the title “priests” to His people in Exodus 19, His kingdom of priests had been carrying on priestly work as long as God had been working to redeem people and to show to others His gracious will. God called *all* of Israel His priests because He had set them apart. He had brought Israel out of slavery and to Himself. They were freed to live in sacrificial service, worship and witness to Him. They were set apart from the surrounding nations as a “holy nation” (Ex. 19:5–6).

Read Ps. 145:10–12. What were the people of Israel to do as God’s priests?

As God’s priests, Israel itself would serve as a mediator — a beacon — to all the nations: “Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks; foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers; but you shall be called the priests of the Lord; they shall speak of you as the minis-

ters of our God” (Is. 61:5–6).

God called Israel first a “kingdom,” that is, a people gathered and organized by Him and in Him as their King (Ex. 15:18), the King over all nations. They have not earned this status for themselves. *God* initiates, *He* promises, *He* forgives, *He* redeems. Priesthood is a gift, a blessing graciously bestowed on people called into a relationship with God to carry out *His* will, to be *His* instruments. “No one takes this honor for himself” (HEB. 5:4).

The royal priests do not serve themselves, but the One who made them priests, and they serve all others within the covenant. They are servants and mediators of God’s salvation to the world. Toward others, the priest’s most important task was to teach.

The Levitical Priesthood

Read Num. 3:5–13. What does God say about the tribe of Levi? What are their duties? **Read Num. 18:7; Deut. 17:8–12 and Deut. 33:8–10.** What are the duties of the Levitical priesthood as described in these verses?

Of the tribe of Levi, God said, “For the LORD your God has chosen him out of all your tribes to stand and minister in the name of the LORD, him and his sons for all time” (DEUT. 18:5). The Levitical priests served as mediators or go-betweens in formal worship. The entire tribe maintained the Tabernacle. From among the tribe of Levites, Aaron and his sons were appointed to be the priests who offered up the people’s daily and yearly sacrifices (LEV. 1:7–8). The high priest alone stood in for the Aaronic priests, the Levites, and the entire people, making yearly atonement for all sins in the Holy of Holies (EX. 30:6–10; LEV. 16:32–34). The priests reminded Israel of their present relationship to God and of the work of the Messiah still to come.

Israel’s worship was given by God to make Him known within Israel and through Israel to the surrounding nations. In Genesis, Noah (GEN. 8:20) and Abraham (GEN. 21:33) served as priests for their families. The formal Levitical priesthood would carry out these duties for all of Israel in a public worship setting. Still, the Levitical responsibilities did not put an end to the identity and work given by God to His entire kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6).

There is a *both/and* nature to the priesthood. All Israel was called to priestly standing before God, to serve as mediators on behalf of their future generations and on behalf of the surrounding nations, the Gentiles. At the same time, there were priests from within Israel to

⁴ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 1, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 246.

⁵ *Luther’s Works* 1:247, emphasis added.

serve as mediators on behalf of Israel, administering the sacrifices of forgiveness and grace, proclaiming, teaching and praying.

God's revelation to His people was a revelation of grace and their identity rested on His continuing favor, sealed with His pledge of faithfulness in the covenant. But Israel would forget God's faithfulness and come to think *they* possessed something that had drawn God *to them*. Many misunderstood their identity as a privilege exclusive to them and meant for no one else. They would lose track of the promise that the blessings given to them would result in a blessing for all the nations (GEN. 12:1-3; 26:4-5).

God's Faithful Servant

Israel's service rested on God's promise of a faithful Servant of the Lord yet to come, one who would fulfill the service Israel could not achieve.

Read Is. 42:1-7; Is. 49:5-6; Is. 52:13-15 and Is. 53:10. *What is said about the Lord's Servant? What will He do?*

The Servant's faithfulness would involve sacrifice and priestly service, but not in the way of Aaron. The Servant would suffer in *self-sacrifice* — offering *Himself* for sin, silent as a lamb (Is. 53:7), bearing all griefs, sorrows, transgressions, iniquities and chastisement (Is. 53:4-5) for the Lord "laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Is. 53:6).

Read Gen. 3:15; Micah 5:2; Deut. 18:15-18; 2 Sam. 7:4-5, 12-13; Is. 7:14; Dan. 7:13-14 and Ps. 2:1-2. *In these verses, what promises does God make to His people? How are all of these promises fulfilled in Jesus, the promised Servant of the Lord?*

The Order of Melchizedek

The Lord's Servant has many titles and He will also be a "a priest forever." The Old Testament describes Melchizedek's mysterious appearance. He reappears in one of the great messianic psalms (Ps. 110) as the pattern for an eternal royal Priest who sits at the Lord's right hand.

Read Ps. 110:2-4 and Heb. 7:1-22. *What is distinctive about the new, promised Priest of the order of Melchizedek?*

In the eternal, royal Priest to come, the earthly call of Israel as a royal priesthood will be fulfilled in the universal priesthood of all justified believers, old and new.

"PRIEST" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Servant, the Seed, the Son, has come. He is "God with us" (MATT. 1:23), the anointed Son of Man, serving and saving people. His coming is the fulfillment of every promise to Israel, the righteousness that Israel failed to offer and the atonement that every other sacrifice anticipated. The work promised in the Servant, who is King and Priest, creates the kingdom of priests. Their priestly service is forever grounded in Him.

Promises Fulfilled

This is the *New Testament*. Its newness is that of promise (prophecy) and fulfillment. The New Testament makes plain the preparatory character of the Old Testament. The New Testament is utterly dependent upon Christ, the fulfillment of the Old Testament in all its parts.

Read Matt. 5:17-18; John 5:39-40, 46-47 and Luke 24:44-47. *What does the Lord Jesus say about the fulfillment of the promises concerning Himself in the Old Testament Scriptures?*

God delivered the people of Israel from slavery. He chose them as His covenant people and promised to send His Servant, who would be Prophet (DEUT. 18:15), Priest (Ps. 110:4) and King (Ps. 2:6). The Old Testament royal priesthood was grounded entirely in God's gracious provision, His redemptive work and His promises. The royal priesthood of the Old Testament was redeemed by grace through faith alone, just as the New Testament royal priesthood. Yet the New Testament priesthood is just that — *new*.

Read Heb. 3:1-6. *What is "new" in the New Testament priesthood?*

The New Testament royal priesthood is defined entirely in the light of Christ, who is our great High Priest. He offered the full atoning sacrifice of Himself, the sacrifice anticipated by the countless Old Testament sacrifices. In Jesus we share "in a heavenly calling" in a priesthood conferred in the covenant of Baptism, intended for all nations (MATT. 28:19). This new priesthood is not focused on Israel or its sacrifices, but on proclaiming the Gospel of Christ's sacrifice for all people.

Read Luke 1:67-79. *What does Zechariah (a member of the Levitical priesthood) say about the promises of God and about sunrise and shadows? Read Col. 2:16-19 and Heb. 10:1.* *What is said in these verses about the shadows that were the Old Testament sacrifices and festivals?*

Shadows are not the substance of a thing, but they do give an outline or idea of what the thing is like. They point to the substance itself. It is worth looking at the shadow, but it is essential to keep looking closely for the thing itself. Israel often allowed itself to be blinded by the shadow, forsaking the substance and embracing only the shadow.

The Great High Priest

Israel's high priest and the entire Levitical system were only shadows of the coming perfect Priest, who would offer Himself as sacrifice once for all. The great High Priest, Christ Jesus, perfectly fulfilled the covenant in all its parts by His humble obedience to all the Law's demands (MATT. 5:17; ROM. 5:19), atoning for the sins of all the people and entering alone into the Holy Place (HEB. 9:12). He fulfills and replaces the Levitical priesthood in His New Testament priesthood. Christ is without sin, obedient even to "death on a cross" (PHIL. 2:8). His atoning sacrifice is not merely for Israel's sins against the covenant, but for the sins of the world. This Priest offers Himself!

Read 1 Peter 2:24–25 and Heb. 7:23–28. What has our High Priest done for us and what does He still do for us?

All priesthood is made clear only in the great High Priest, Christ Jesus, and His work. His radical mercy became a stumbling block for many (ROM. 9:32–33; 1 COR. 1:23). "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him" (JOHN 1:11). They preferred the shadow of the Old Testament's sinful, weak priests and all the old rhythms and rituals to the sinless Servant-Priest whose deep sympathy for sinners results in complete and eternal redemption (HEB. 9:12). The people of Israel deluded themselves into thinking that they were the end of what God was doing instead of a tool through which He worked for all the world.

Our High Priest comes by the Father's call and anointing (HEB. 5:4–6; IS. 61:1). Jesus is the only-begotten Son of the Father, now higher than the angels because He has been raised from the dead and exalted to God's right hand (COL. 3:1; HEB. 1:13). He is also a king, with a kingdom not of this world, yet far greater than any of this world (JOHN 18:36).

Priesthood in the New Covenant

As Christ's people we consider our priesthood in light of "Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession."

(HEB. 3:1). Our High Priest provides redemption in the new covenant He made and sealed with His own sacrifice (LUKE 22:20). This new covenant accomplishes what the old covenant could not do with its repeated sacrifices. Christ Himself *is* both priest and final sacrifice. From this point on, priesthood rests on the blood of Christ and on his resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God, where He intercedes for us.

Read Heb. 9:11–15. What has the sacrifice of our High Priest accomplished for us? How is His sacrifice greater than the sacrifices under the old covenant?

Christ's sacrifice is *representative, perfect* and *universal*. The sacrifice is *representative* because Christ stands in for every sinner, the substitute whose life, death and resurrection are mine. Unlike the old covenant sacrifices, His sacrifice is *perfect* because He is the sinless, only-begotten Son, whose death is full atonement for sin. There are no more atoning sacrifices to come. His sacrifice is *universal*, that is, it is salvation won for all (2 COR. 5:19). Israel of old looked forward to this great day (HEB. 11:13), and now the new Israel looks back at what Christ has accomplished. The new Israel also looks forward in eager anticipation to His promised return, when He will raise the dead, judge all people and establish the new heaven and earth.

Faith trusts the promises of what Christ accomplished for all people in every age when He died on the cross. Already in the Old Testament God saw Jesus' death and resurrection as reality, so He has always saved by Christ's work (1 PETER 1:19–20; REV. 13:8). The rituals and sacrifices tied to the old priesthood are set aside. What saves is not "yesterday's news" but today's reality, today's promises and faith in those promises. This cross is yours. This empty tomb is yours.

Read 1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:5–6 and Rev. 5:9–10. What has our High Priest, "the firstborn from the dead," done for all who believe? How does the great High Priest shape the royal priesthood?

The royal priesthood is rooted in Christ, the great High Priest, and not in the Law or the Levitical priesthood. In Christ's atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world, the promise of salvation is declared to all the nations (IS. 49:6; GAL. 3:27–29; EPH. 2:12–13) and not only to Abraham's physical descendants. The priesthood is then also extended to all who believe in Him "from every tribe and language and people and nation." There is no need to become part of the nation of Israel (let alone members of Levi's tribe) to be included in this new priesthood. The

sacrifices offered are no longer slaughtered animals, but the living, spiritual sacrifices of the people of God and the “excellencies” they proclaim are the mighty saving deeds of God for all people.

The New Covenant of Holy Baptism

God makes priests from among all the nations and He does it one at a time, adding to His kingdom of priests in Holy Baptism. They are “born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1 PETER 1:3-4). Baptism is the gracious work of God, done without any thought of bringing good works to the font. The baptismal covenant is forged entirely from one side — God’s side.

Read John 3:5-6; Rom. 6:3-4 and Titus 3:5. *What takes place when we are baptized?*

Baptized into His death, we are linked to Christ’s priestly act at the point of His own sacrifice. Baptism is not a superficial naming — a social christening — but marks one as new, reborn not of flesh, but of the Spirit. God makes priests in Baptism. Infant or adult, all are priests.

The Priestly Calling of All Christians

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 PETER 2:9).

As a believer comes forth out of the waters of Baptism, priesthood comes along as well. The three-fold dimension — sacrifice, prayer and teaching — still marks the priesthood, but the New Testament priesthood portrays these responsibilities differently. There is no reference in the New Testament to any priestly office other than the royal priesthood of the baptized. In the New Testament individuals are still called and authorized for the public ministry on behalf of the royal priesthood, but “priest” is not included in the various titles applied to the church’s public ministers.

Sacrifice marks all in the royal priesthood, but in the New Testament, sacrifice is differently conceived. There are no blood sacrifices of slaughtered beasts or offerings of grain or wine. Now the sacrifices are the “spiritual sacrifices” of the royal priesthood, prompted by the ultimate sacrifice of our great High Priest.

Read Ps. 51:17; Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:15-16 and Phil. 4:18. *What sacrifices do we offer as God’s royal priests? Read 1 Peter 2:13-25 and 1 Peter 3:1-8.* *Suffering is a mark of those who belong to the great High Priest. Some may be called to martyrdom, but what daily examples of sacrificial living does the apostle Peter give?*

The royal priesthood offers the sacrifice of prayer. Our High Priest Jesus, who prays for us, invites us to join in prayer in the Lord’s Prayer (LUKE 11:2-4; MATT. 6:9-13). The royal priesthood is involved in the mediatorial work of constant prayer, interceding for others before God (1 THESS. 5:17; 1 TIM. 2:1-5). The priesthood prays in obedience to God’s command and in confident response to His promise to hear us. Our great High Priest prayed both alone and with His disciples, and our priestly life of prayer is both corporate and individual. Priestly prayer is not limited to formal, liturgical settings, as important as the prayers of public worship are.

Read Acts 4:27-30; Acts 12:5 and Acts 13:2-3. *For what purpose is each of these sacrifices of prayer offered up to God? Read 1 Peter 2:9.* *What are God’s royal priests to do?*

Royal priests serve by proclaiming the Gospel, passing on what they first received from Christ — the promises of God made plain in Baptism, in the Word spoken and in the Word tied to bread and wine, to body and blood. By participating in all these things, the royal priests “proclaim the excellencies” of God. What are God’s “excellencies”? The Greek term, *arete*, may be defined in English as “uncommon character worthy of praise, *excellence of character, exceptional civic virtue*” or as a “manifestation of divine power, *miracle*.”⁶ Here the term describes God’s goodness, His excellence and worthiness of praise. The Church’s mission to proclaim the excellencies of God, to make the Gospel known, is not a work set aside to be carried out only by a few.

Read Luke 2:36-38; Acts 8:1-4 and Acts 11:19-21. *How do these royal priests proclaim the excellencies of God?*

Holding up the excellencies of God is also important among our fellow royal priests (COL. 3:16). We need to hear the story of God’s work and His promises again and again, so the royal priesthood proclaims God’s excellen-

⁶ Frederick Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 130. Its plural is translated as “excellencies” by the ESV in 1 Pet. 2:9, but elsewhere as “praises” (KJV, NIV, CSB), “goodness” (NLT), or “virtues.” Luther’s German Bible rendered it *Tugenden*, virtues or good deeds.

cies in weekly liturgy, daily devotions, Bible studies with fellow church members and casual conversations with a brother or sister in Christ. Our vocations, our callings from God, are to specific people and places: family, work, society and congregation.

Read 1 Peter 2:11–17. *How are royal priests to carry out their priestly duties, by word and behavior, in their personal vocations?*

What about carrying the message “to the end of the earth” (ACTS 1:8)? Remote mission fields are, of course, included, but the first challenge is simply to take one step beyond wherever there is safety and familiarity. As Jesus sends the disciples, He starts with Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria — and then to “the end of the earth.” The mission of the Church — of the royal priesthood, the baptized — begins at home, but it does not end there.

We have God-granted time to spread the Word, and there is service that is needed and people to serve. This does not mean, however, that every member of the royal priesthood offers identical types of priestly service. All, in various ways, proclaim the excellencies of God’s saving grace in Christ Jesus, but not everyone is a pastor or minister or teacher of the church. “Not many of you should become teachers” (JAMES 3:1). The Holy Scriptures teach not only the general priesthood of all believers, but also the public Office of the Ministry.

All members of the royal priesthood are gifted *by the Holy Spirit*. The Spirit’s work alone enables the confession that marks the Church: “Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says ‘Jesus is accursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” (1 COR. 12:3–4).

Read 1 Cor. 12:4–11. *For what purpose does the Spirit give His gifts to the Church? How might these Spirit-given gifts be used in proclaiming the excellencies of God?*

There is continuity with the Old Testament, but in the New Testament the priesthood has been transformed by the work of Christ. The task is to be faithful to the message, while also translating the message for people in new circumstances. As the last days before Christ’s return stretched out, the church needed to keep an eye on the idea of the royal priesthood lest it lose its identity and mission. Efforts were made, but in the long run, the focus shifted.

PRIESTHOOD IN THE EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHURCH

CLEMENT (Bishop of Rome from AD 88–99)

Clement urged believers, “[L]et each of you, brothers, give thanks to God with your own group, maintaining a good conscience, not overstepping the designated rule of his ministry, but acting with reverence.”⁷ Clement and the Christian community understood that everyone involved — the people and those in the public Office of the Ministry — had particular roles to play, and that all should respect the responsibilities of others and carry out their own tasks. Clement writes that the church in Corinth identified and provided for those who would minister to them in the public office and use their abilities for the upbuilding of all. The laity should honor those serving in the public office and those in the office should allow the laity truly to be the body of Christ.

Read 1 Thess. 5:12–13; Heb. 13:17 and 1 Peter 5:1–4. *How are clergy and laypeople to respond to one another?*

POLYCARP (c. 69–c. 155)

Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, wrote to the Christians in Philippi, addressing them as “brothers.” He saw them as actively involved in the life of the congregation and, concerning a problem with a presbyter, called on them to “be reasonable in this matter, and do not regard such people as enemies, but, as sick and straying members, restore them, in order that you may save your body in its entirety.”⁸ Widows were not marginalized, but as “God’s altar” offered prayers for the community.⁹ Polycarp emphasizes the idea of sacrifice in response to the believers’ identity as members of the royal priesthood of Christ.

JUSTIN MARTYR (c. 100–c.165)

Another theologian, Justin Martyr, emphasized the corporate action of the community in the Eucharist, as the people together offered prayers and brought bread, wine and water for the celebration of the Sacrament. While Justin speaks of the public ministry — the one who presides at the celebration — he also refers to those present as “the true high priestly race of God.”¹⁰

⁷ 1 Clement 41:1. In Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 99.

⁸ *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* 11:4, Holmes, 293, 295.

⁹ *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians* 4:3, Holmes 285.

¹⁰ *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 116; Ante-Nicene Fathers, 10 vols. ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885–87; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 257.

IRENAEUS (c. 130–c.200)

Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon, believed that the church had a priestly nature because of the priestly character of all those who made up the church. Irenaeus wrote, “For all the righteous possess the sacerdotal rank.”¹¹ The church has a priestly character because God has made it so, giving spiritual gifts to be used in service.

Read Acts 2:42–47. *In what ways do these early believers express their sacerdotal, or priestly, rank?*

MATHETES (writing c. 130)

The early Christian teacher Mathetes said that Christians are in the world like the soul is in the body. The soul is there to enliven and sustain the body: “God has assigned them this illustrious position, which it were unlawful of them to forsake.”¹² That is, there is no avoiding the ministry and mission of the priesthood to make salvation known. Witness and mission is not the work simply of those in the public office. It is the work of all in the body.

TERTULLIAN (c.160–c.225)

The theologian Tertullian understood that there are certainly those who serve publicly, but he saw all people touched by the Holy Spirit as priests offering spiritual sacrifices to God. Referring to all Christians, he said, “We are the true adorers and the true priests praying in the spirit.”¹³ Tertullian believed that the same high standards concerning marriage for those in the public ministry also applied to all Christians.

The early church fathers discussed the concept of the royal priesthood in a matter of fact way, without first needing to lay out a theological foundation for it. This suggests that the spiritual priesthood of all believers was not an obscure teaching but was widely understood by those who read their various texts. The whole church was a priestly people and, while there were those who presided publicly in worship, all offered spiritual sacrifices because of their spiritual identity and their relationship with Christ.

Read Ps. 50:7–15, 23; Ps. 51:17 and Ps. 107:20–22. *What does God command concerning the spiritual sacrifices that His people are to offer?*

¹¹ *Irenaeus Against Heresies*, Book IV, ch. 8:3, *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, 1: 471.

¹² *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, ch. 6[, 5], *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, 1: 27.

¹³ *On Prayer*, ch. 28; *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, 3: 690.

ORIGEN (c. 185–c. 254)

Origen responded to the accusations of the pagan Celsus that Christians do not serve any valuable role in society. Celsus had charged that if Christians really wanted to help, they should work together with the emperor, even serving as soldiers and generals in his army. To this charge, Origen responded that Christians do serve as the emperor’s soldiers when they take on the “whole armor of God” (EPH. 6:11) and offer their prayers for all in authority, including the emperor himself, as the apostle Paul instructed them to do (1 TIM. 2:1–2). Origen continued by pointing out that even non-Christian society exempts priests from military service, so that they may remain undefiled and continue their religious service to the supposed gods of the empire. How much more, then, should Christians serve the emperor by “fighting as priests and worshippers of God,” offering up their prayers to the true God, asking Him to aid the emperor in righteous causes. Christians, Origen pointed out, form a “special army of piety” through their intercessions to God. Nor is it only the emperor that Christians pray for; prayers are sent up “as from priests on behalf of the people in our country.” He continued: “Christians do more good to their countries than the rest of mankind, since they educate citizens and teach them to be devoted to God,” the real guardian of their cities. That is the way Christians serve as soldiers and generals: an “army of piety,” priests who “fight” for their nation and their communities through intercession and teaching. That is the “more divine and necessary service” (*leitourgia*) to which Christians are devoting themselves, the “service in the church of God for the salvation of men.”¹⁴

Read 1 Tim. 2:1–6. *How does God regard this work of priestly intercession for those in positions of governmental authority? When we take on such a mediatorial role for the sake of our society, in whose work are we taking part?*

Growth and Changes

CYPRIAN (c.200–258)

Cyprian changed the focus of priesthood, identifying it only with the public office. He believed the bishops and other clergy were a *special priesthood* who offered *special sacrifices*. The royal priesthood gave way to a high priestly class. The spiritual sacrifices of the whole

¹⁴ See *Origen: Contra Celsum* (trans. Henry Chadwick; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 509–510 (= *Contra Celsum* VIII.73–75). This passage from Origen was not included in the full CTCR report.

priesthood gave way to an actual sacrifice offered to God in Holy Communion.

Gentiles who came to the faith in increasing numbers were familiar with Greek temple worship and its priests. At this time, the chief cities of the Roman Empire had temples and priests and a well-structured political order. Church administrative structure came to be patterned after imperial rule. The sacrifice for sins by Christ, the great High Priest who offered Himself, was difficult to grasp. The belief that all believers were priests spiritually was confusing. If sacrifices are spiritual, it seemed that there were no real priests and Christianity was a priestless faith.

Although Cyprian introduced a perspective that tended to undermine the role of the laity as a royal priesthood, his concern was the preservation of orthodox teaching. He and bishops like him sought to maintain the church's identity and continuity during a period of significant numerical growth.

Read 2 Tim. 1:13–14; 2 Tim. 2:1–2; 2 Tim. 2:22–26 and 2 Tim. 4:1–5. *What tasks is Timothy to take on in the church at Ephesus? How will such tasks help to maintain the church's identity and continuity?*

Cyprian's vigorous doctrinal concerns were not entirely on the mark biblically. He said that the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice of the Lord, and that the power to offer this sacrifice rests in the bishop. Such teachings led to a change in the way those in the public office were perceived. Those in public office were now not simply distinct; their ministry was elevated. The growing agreement that "priesthood" meant the clergy placed the responsibility for maintaining the unity of the church, the purity of its teaching and the consistency of its worship in the clerical priest who offers up the eucharistic sacrifice. While no one may have intended to overshadow the idea of the universal priesthood, a new tone was struck and a new direction set. The way in which service was offered together by the public office (the clergy) and by all in the royal priesthood would become skewed over time.

AUGUSTINE (354–430)

Not everyone followed the course that Cyprian set. The bishop and theologian Augustine cast light on the blessings of Baptism. Believers were made members of the royal priesthood in Christ's washing, by virtue of the faith given to them and their place in the Body of Christ. Priests do not empower Baptism. Christ does. Augustine

said, "My origin is Christ. ... For I believe, not in the minister by whose hands I am baptized, but in Him who justifieth the ungodly, that my faith may be counted to me as righteousness."¹⁵

At confirmation, the individual was anointed with oil, a sign of being equipped for service in Christ's kingdom. Commenting on Rev. 20:6, Augustine wrote: "This clearly does not mean only the bishops and presbyters, who are now called by the distinctive name of 'priests' in the Church; but just as we call all Christians 'Christ's' in virtue of their sacramental anointing (*chrisma*) so we call them all 'priests' because they are members of the one Priest. And the apostle Peter says of them that they are 'a holy people, a royal priesthood.'"¹⁶

In his book, *The City of God*, Augustine wrote, "To this God we owe our service — what in Greek is called *latría* — whether in the various sacraments or in ourselves. For we are his temple, collectively, and as individuals ... We offer to him, on the altar of the heart, the sacrifice of humility and praise, and the flame on the altar is the burning fire of charity."¹⁷

The body of Christ is served by those in the public office, but their service leads hearts, minds and lives to action. Membership in the royal priesthood means active work. While Augustine and his views about the priesthood were not forgotten through the Middle Ages, the seeds that Cyprian planted would grow to provide order and authority.

Read 1 Cor. 12:4–11, 27–31. *Which of the gifts and activities listed by Paul represent public offices in the church? All or just a few? How does the apostle link the Office of the Public Ministry to the service of the entire priesthood?*

At the time of the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), Rome did not have superiority over other centers of Christianity. Yet in the following centuries, Rome's status grew. The move of the capital to Constantinople in the East left a hole in the Western Mediterranean, and the eventual collapse of the Roman Empire left a vacuum that the Church of Rome would fill.

¹⁵ *In Answer to the Letters of Petilian, the Donatist*, Book I, chap. 7–8; *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995; reprint of the 1887 ed. by Christian Literature Publishing), 522.

¹⁶ *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, Book XX, chap. 10, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 919.

¹⁷ *The City of God*, Book X, chap. 3, Bettenson, 375.

GREGORY THE GREAT (Gregory I, pope from 590–604)

Gregory the Great was a visionary leader. From Rome he sent out ordained clergy and monks to serve as missionaries. As they took the message, they pointed back to the Roman church as the source that sent them, thus raising Rome's image and boosting the prestige of the Bishop of Rome, as well as that of the clergy he sent. At the same time, Gregory did not turn his back on the laity. He understood that the mission of the church fell to both priests and laypeople. He said: "The priest's lips should teach knowledge, for he is a messenger of the Lord [by priest he means an ordained cleric]; *but all may attain the same high dignity if they will.* Whoever calls his neighbor from wicked ways to a right course of life, he too, certainly is a messenger of the Lord. Hast thou no bread to give to the needy? Thou hast a tongue. Thou hast something of more value than bread. . . . To the poorest even the little that he has received will be reckoned as a talent."¹⁸

Read 2 Cor. 9:10–15. Aware of the needs of others, how are the Corinthian Christians to live and serve as priests of God? What words does Paul use that suggest priestly service and sacrifice?

In the earliest centuries of the church, Christians who fell into grave sin were admonished and then brought back into fellowship through public Confession and Absolution, followed by some public satisfaction — fasting perhaps, or giving to Christian charity. Such satisfaction was an expression of determination to avoid sin and to lead a Christian life, but it was not an effort to secure or guarantee forgiveness. As the church entered the seventh century — often thought of as the start of the Middle Ages — several changes took place. Public confession was replaced by private confession made to a priest, and the satisfaction previously prescribed by the congregation was instead determined by that priest alone.

Read 1 Cor. 5:1–5 and 2 Cor. 2:5–11. How were the Christians in Corinth to respond to an unrepentant member of their community? Why must the Christian community forgive the repentant sinner?

Other ideas were added to the practice of Confession and Absolution. The virtues of the saints were said to be on deposit as "a treasury of merit." Ordinary sinners could draw from this deposit to lessen their own time in purgatory. Believers worried about navigating this complex system and so greater emphasis and authority were given to the priest, who became the gatekeeper of

eternal life and death. The role and responsibility of the Christian laity to engage with and to forgive a sinner was diminished. The life of repentance was controlled exclusively by the ordained clergy through private Confession and Absolution. While forgiveness was still given, too often the message was one of compliance and obedience. It was hard for the institutional church to resist the power available in the practice of Confession and Absolution. Often supported by political authorities, the practice was not only a spiritual exercise, but also a useful vehicle for social control and formation.

Changes in the doctrine and practice of the Lord's Supper further boosted the image of the priest in the eyes of the public and widened the gap between those ordained in the Office of the Public Ministry and those in the universal priesthood. The priest became the dispenser or controller of the Eucharist, and the sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise that came from the universal priesthood became less important.

The expansion and growth of church structure and canon law was a final development that contributed to clerical prestige. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, popes and canon lawyers regularized church administration as well as church law, strongly supporting the authority of those in ecclesiastical office.

Developments such as these undermined the place of the royal priesthood in the life of the church. The early church held up both the royal priesthood *and* the Office of the Ministry, each necessary in its own way. That changed in the Middle Ages. No single development was enough to tip the scales, but the accumulated effect favored those in the ordained ministry.

THOMAS AQUINAS (1225–1274)

Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican monk and theologian, believed that Christ, by His death on the cross, offered more to God than was demanded in payment for the sins of the world. Sin was viewed as deeds or misdeeds that need to be offset, and for that Christ's satisfaction, like the extra merits of the saints, stood ready to be used. The clerics were the ones who made the connection and squared the accounts, a role that contributed to their high image.

Although Aquinas raised up the ordained clergy he still had a place for the universal priesthood. The faithful offer up their praise and worship. It was in worship that the Mass was celebrated, with the ordained priest doing his work. In connection with that action, the people were

¹⁸ Eastwood, 106–7, emphasis added.

made fit to offer their praise and service. Yet while the people of the royal priesthood had a role to play, their status or identity came from what the priest did.

Voices for the People

Others who spoke up forcefully for the people, Marsilius of Padua (1275–1342), John Wycliffe (1330–1384) and John Hus (1372–1415) were opposed by the institutional church.¹⁹ On the eve of the Reformation, even with the universal priesthood much overshadowed, one more voice came from Marcus von Weida (1450–1516), a Dominican monk. Von Weida, in a treatise on the doctrine and practice of prayer, urged ordinary people to lift up one another before God that they might be strengthened and encouraged in the Christian life, just as believers did in the New Testament epistles. They had the right to pray to God without need of any clerical go-between. This call to lay claim to the identity as priests before God is striking, not only for what was said, but also because such a call was unfortunately all too rare. But things were about to change, and a light was about to shine on theological concepts and biblical truths that had long been ignored.

Read James 5:13–20. In what way do the actions listed here by the apostle James reflect priestly responsibilities?

LUTHER'S REFORMATION

With the advent of the Reformation, the royal priesthood once again came to the fore. Martin Luther's understanding of this teaching was shaped in some ways by his social, political and cultural context, but he said what he did about the priesthood of believers simply because he believed it was biblical. The teaching grew from God's gracious action and bore witness to the work of Christ.

The royal priesthood was tied to an understanding of the Church, not as an institution, but as a community of believers, created by the Holy Spirit working through the Word. "God's Word cannot be without God's people," Luther wrote, "and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's Word."²⁰

Read Acts 14:23, 1 Cor. 7:17 and Eph. 5:25–27. How is the word "church" used in these verses? In which does it

¹⁹ Marsilius was excommunicated for his views. John Wycliffe died of a stroke, but the church later had his bones exhumed and burned. John Hus was condemned at the Council of Constance in 1415 and burned at the stake.

²⁰ Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," *Luther's Works*, vol. 41, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 150.

mean the local Christian gathering? In which verses does the word refer to the Body of Christ? In which verses is the church spoken of in connection with the Word?

The Church and the Word

The institutional church did not embrace Luther's message. The changes that Luther sought would have resulted in a far different approach and attitude on the part of the institutional church, but the church was not interested in retooling its message or in relinquishing its power and authority. The clergy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy were not interested in what Luther had found in the Word.

Read John 8:31–32; Acts 8:4; Rom. 10:6–9 and 1 Thess. 2:13. According to these verses, who possesses the Word?

Luther came to see that the Word was not the personal possession of the clergy or the institutional church. The Word belongs to the Church, the universal royal priesthood. Luther added to his concept of the church throughout his career, but from 1518 to 1521, he published many of his ideas on the church and the royal priesthood. He unfolded the biblical teaching of the church as both God's holy creation and a fallible institution. He showed that the church's proper authority rests in the Word of God (not in the institution itself) and explained that its defining traits or identifying marks are all tied to the Word of God and that ecclesial structures such as councils or the papacy are inherently fallible. He distinguished between the spiritual, holy Church, made up of all those whom the Spirit has brought to faith through the Word, and the visible, institutional church whose members include both believers and hypocrites. Luther rejected the Roman notion that the ordained were "spiritual" and holy while the baptized were not.

Read Rom. 1:7; Rom. 15:25; Eph. 1:1 and 1 Cor. 1:2. A saint is a person who has been made holy in Christ and set apart for a special purpose. To whom does Paul give the title of saint in these verses?

Luther's thinking was not always perfectly consistent, but, above all, he taught that the Church is an assembly of believers created by the Spirit. He knows that in this life there are necessary institutions and structures that can (or should) see to the public preaching of the Word. Within this structure or institution people gather to worship and hear the Word, to have sins forgiven. Where faith is worked by such means, those who hear and believe are priests, Church in the primary sense.

All Christians are priests even though not all are pastors or ministers. The difference lies not in status but in the office or call they have and its particular responsibilities. In “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation” (1520), Luther demolishes three “walls” that the Roman church had erected: the division between spiritual (clergy) and secular (laity) classes; the papal claim that only Rome (not ordinary Christians) could rightly interpret Scripture; and that the pope was not subject to reproof from the rest of the church.²¹ Secular rulers may rightly intervene in order to make provision for the preaching of the Gospel because, as baptized Christians, they are priests. As rulers they have an oversight role, rather like fathers for children. They have an office that determines the specific ways in which they serve as members of the royal priesthood.

In “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” (1520), Luther charges that the institutional hierarchy bolstered its claim of authority by claiming to control Sacraments that were not sacraments and by holding the true Sacraments hostage. The Sacraments were not given to the institutional authorities but to the Church. All believers possess these gifts and, as priests, can see to their exercise: “Let everyone, therefore, who knows himself to be a Christian, be assured of this, that we are all equally priests, that is, we have the same power in respect to the Word and the sacraments. However, no one may make use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior. (For what is the common property of all, no individual may arrogate to himself, unless he is called.)”²²

The Ministry of the Word

In “The Freedom of the Christian” (1520), Luther distinguishes between the priesthood of believers and the ministry of the Word (the public office filled by the clergy). Luther writes that “although we all are equally priests, we cannot all publicly minister and teach. We ought not do so even if we could.”²³ All believers, all priests, could fill the public office, yet they don’t. (This is not simply a pragmatic matter — that not all could fit into the pulpit,

or if all baptized on Sunday, the child might drown for all the water poured. There are additional biblical expectations and qualifications in the pastoral epistles to be honored that include one’s sex, the condition of one’s family life, one’s ability and reputation and so forth. Luther elsewhere talks of these.)

Read 1 Tim. 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. *What biblical expectations and qualifications for the pastoral office are given here?*

Pastors and church officials had a responsibility to feed God’s people with the Gospel and to set right things around them that are wrong in the church, but many failed. Fortunately, God’s people are not dependent on such clergy but are buoyed up by the Word.

Preaching on Matt. 18:15–20, Luther said:

Here Jesus is saying that he does not only want [the condemnation of sin and proclamation of the forgiveness of sins] to take place in the church, but he also gives this right and freedom where two or three are gathered together, so that among them the comfort and the forgiveness of sins may be proclaimed and pronounced. He pours out [his forgiveness] even more richly and places the forgiveness of sins for them in every corner, so that they not only find the forgiveness of sins in the congregation but also at home in their houses, in the fields and gardens, wherever one of them comes to another in search of comfort and deliverance. It shall be at my disposal when I am troubled and sorry, in tribulation and vulnerable, when I need something, at whatever hour and time it may be. There is not always a sermon being given publicly in the church, so when my brother or neighbor comes to me, I am to lay my troubles before my neighbor and ask for comfort. ... again I should comfort others, and say, “Dear friend, dear brother, why don’t you lay aside your burdens. It is certainly not God’s will that you experience this suffering. God had his Son die for you so that you do not sorrow but rejoice.”²⁴

Read Acts 2:17–19; Acts 8:1–8 and Acts 11:19–21. *What prophecy is fulfilled in Acts 2 and then again in Acts 8 and 11? As the scattered believers flee the persecution without their apostolic leaders, how do they illustrate*

²¹ Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 44, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 123–39.

²² Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 36, ed. Abdel Ross Wentz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 116.

²³ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of the Christian,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957), 356.

²⁴ Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. Matthew, Chapters 18–24 (1537–1540),” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 67, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 407–8; *Luther’s Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993), 47:297–98.

Peter's words about "proclaiming the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 PETER 2:9)?

The pastor is a priest/believer who serves in a particular way because he is asked to do so by others on behalf of the royal priesthood, but Rome wanted to control the appointments and so remind people and pastor who was really in charge.

Luther responded to that idea with "That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture" (1523), addressed to the town of Leisnig.²⁵ The title leaves no doubt about Luther's position. Not only, said Luther, does the congregation have the right to call its own pastor, it has the responsibility to depose one who speaks contrary to the Word of God. While all baptized believers have the right and duty to proclaim the Word, were someone to be called to Leisnig, that person then would have the office of preaching, the public office that serves the congregation. That person, by faithfully fulfilling the office, deserves respect.

Read Matt. 20:25–28; Gal. 6:6 and Heb. 13:17. What do these verses say about the relationship between the royal priesthood and those of the priesthood who hold public office in the church?

The pastor has respect not because he demands it or because he is owed it, but because he serves the priests with the Word. Any variation of "pray, pay and obey" has no place. Instead, because he loves Christ's people and loves what he does, the pastor would rejoice that baptized believers carry the Word with them in hearts and minds and use it wherever and whenever they can. With such a faithful ministry where people are fed and comforted by the Word, the "hire and fire" problem is diminished. And when the people understand that the public preaching office is not their creation but something Christ gave His Church for their good, they hold a faithful pastor in high regard.

Luther distinguishes between the priesthood of the baptized and the public office of preaching the Word. "No individual can arise by his own authority and arrogate to himself alone what belongs to all."²⁶ "A Priest

is not identical with Presbyter or Minister — for one is born to be a priest, one becomes a minister."²⁷ Where Christians do not have someone in the public office, someone should be selected from the priesthood of the baptized and should be put into the office. The community lays hands upon the person to show that he is now pastor or bishop. When that happens, then all should believe "beyond a shadow of a doubt that this has been done and accomplished by God."²⁸ This approach is biblical, Luther insists, and the public office "established by holy ordination [is] the highest and greatest of the functions of the church, on which the whole power of the church depends, since the church is nothing without the Word and everything in it exists by virtue of the Word alone."²⁹

Luther commended a view of the church that would include the priesthood of the baptized being active in the ministry of the Word, while not undermining the public preaching office. The royal priesthood would ask one or more from among them to occupy the public office for the good of the whole priesthood.

After about 1527, Luther tended to distinguish more between the priesthood and the public office. He did not depart from the idea that all priests possess all the same rights and responsibilities, but he also noted that not every individual baptized Christian is prepared to fulfill every task; some are better suited for some things than others. That does not deny that the royal priest fully possesses all that God gives, but is rather the recognition that God also gives talents and abilities differently to various people. It is the community of priests — the congregation in most cases — that calls someone to the public office and bestows on that person the right to use the gifts that belong to all.

Read Rom. 12:3–8 and 1 Peter 4:8–11. What kinds of gifts does God give to His people? According to the apostle Peter, what is the ultimate purpose of such gifts?

Growing in Faith

Luther confidently expected that the Gospel would change hearts and minds and reform the institutional church, but the parish visitations done in Saxony in 1528 found that often little progress had been made. The devil, the world and the sinful flesh still plague those reborn in

²⁵ Martin Luther, "That a Christian Assembly or Congregation has the Right and Power to Judge Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture," *Luther's Works*, vol. 39, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 305–14.

²⁶ Martin Luther, "Concerning the Ministry," *Luther's Works*, vol. 40, ed. Conrad Bergendorf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 34.

²⁷ *Luther's Works* 40:18.

²⁸ *Luther's Works* 40:37.

²⁹ *Luther's Works* 40:11

Baptism. It was up to the priesthood to keep trying and up to God to grant success where and when He wanted. Luther sought to build up the priesthood by reminding them that they must daily die and rise again to new life in Christ. These lessons are found in the catechisms he wrote in the wake of the visitations to help both the priesthood and those in the public office better teach the faith.

The doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone, at the core of the Augsburg Confession (1530), was also important for the “church question,” for it was the Gospel that made priests. As long as the Church was understood to be only a spiritual assembly, its members did not need structures. But as people living in the created order, they reasonably would expect to have structures. They could live with any number of options as to structure, so long as it was the Gospel that defined identity and empowered service.³⁰

Luther continued to hold to a simple understanding of church and the priesthood. In the Smalcald Articles (1536) he offered another elegant view of Church, plainly evident to anyone in the baptized priesthood: “A seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of the shepherd.”³¹ Children only need to hear Christ’s voice, his message — the love and the forgiving grace — and they know: there is Church, and we who follow that voice are Church. The Word, the Spirit in the Word, create and sustain that. Pastors serve when they repeat the voice, and the baptized priests serve when they use the Word in witness.

Read John 10:4–8, 27–30; Acts 17:10–12; Rom. 16:17–20 and 2 Tim. 3:14–17. *The sheep hear and follow the voice of their true Shepherd. By what standard do the sheep judge the voices of the various shepherds that they may hear?*

We in the priesthood of believers hear the voice of the Shepherd and know this is the voice to follow. His Word makes believers, making priests from the font forward. The Word makes the royal priesthood and sustains it.

³⁰ As time wore on, Luther found himself with a new and parallel church looking to him for organization and ecclesiastical leadership. Luther had never made plans for revamping the institution. He had hoped what was in place would change and thus serve well, but it was not to be. As the 1530s dawned, Luther was forced to deal with any number of requests that would otherwise have gone to a bishop, and Luther became, somewhat to his dismay, a church bureaucrat. He turned to princes to act as emergency bishops and supported superintendents set up as substitutes for old-style bishops.

³¹ Martin Luther, Smalcald Articles III, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 324–325.2.

Royal priests offer themselves in thanksgiving as living sacrifices, intercede for the church and the world and joyfully proclaim the excellencies of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvelous light.

SUMMARY STATEMENTS

1. The royal priesthood is a biblical way to identify, teach and confess the “one, holy, catholic (Christian), and apostolic Church.” That is, the royal priesthood is all believers, “from every tribe and language and people and nation” whom God has made a kingdom and priests (REV. 5:9–10) by creating faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. Individuals become priests of the royal priesthood, the Church, by the saving promises of Baptism into Christ, where we receive the washing of rebirth, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (JOHN 3:5; ACTS 2:38–39; TITUS 3:5).
3. The royal priesthood finds its identity only in Christ, the Great High Priest and only mediator between God and man. Royal priests are in turn called to lives of priestly mediation between God and the world. They offer living sacrifices of thanksgiving, not sacrifices of merit or atonement. In prayer they intercede on behalf of all people. They make known the excellencies of God in Christ, sharing His Word, gifts and blessings with all nations (1 TIM. 2:5; ROM. 12:1; PHIL. 4:6; 1 PETER 2:9).
4. As the people of God, both corporately and individually, we mediate God’s truth of salvation and life to the world around us. Every individual believer is called to confess the faith to others since the mission of the whole Church, that is, the entire royal priesthood, is to make disciples of all nations (MATT. 28:19–20). Members of the royal priesthood share in that calling as they, in their daily lives, give “a defense ... for the hope that is in” them (1 PETER 3:15).
5. Each royal priest is to exercise the functions of the royal priesthood—sacrifice, prayer and proclamation — in a way that accords with his or her vocation within the three estates of home, church and society (see EPHESIANS 5–6; COLOSSIANS 3; 1 TIMOTHY 2).
6. The Holy Spirit is at work wherever the saving work of God in Christ is made known, whether that message is delivered by a layman or a pastor. The Gospel alone is the power of salvation (ROM. 1:16). This means that the proclamation of the Gospel by members of

the royal priesthood as they speak of Christ to others, at home, with fellow believers and in society, is an effective means of grace by which the Holy Spirit creates and nurtures saving faith (ACTS 11:19-24).

7. The royal priesthood does not undermine or negate the Office of the Public Ministry which Christ gives to the Church. Members of the royal priesthood, in various ways, choose one from among them who is equipped to teach and called in an orderly manner to hold the Office of the Public Ministry and to perform its distinctive functions (1 COR. 4:1; 12:28-29; EPH. 4:11; JAMES 3:1; TITUS 1:5).

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” Revelation 1:5-6

