

For the

# LIFE of the WORLD

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## For the **LIFE** of the **WORLD**

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# Called & Ordained

By the Rev. Chad L. Bird

It is common for Lutheran pastors to be referred to as priests... but only by strangers who suppose them to be Roman Catholic clergy. Venerable titles such as pastor, preacher, and minister are ordinarily used by Lutheran laity. Pastors shepherd, preachers proclaim, and ministers serve: the titles correspond to the holy tasks carried out by Christ through His called and ordained men.

Raised eyebrows and wrinkled foreheads, however, are the characteristic reactions to the suggestion that the Office of the Holy Ministry is also a priestly vocation whose occupants may rightly be called priests. Centuries of heated

polemics against Roman Catholicism plus a misconstrual of the Scriptural doctrine of the royal priesthood of the baptized (1 Pet 2:9) have unhappily stolen from modern Lutherans the exceedingly salutary perception of the pastor as priest of God who stands in stead of the High Priest, Jesus Christ, to distribute the most holy gifts of His sacrificial atonement on the fiery altar of the cross.

### **The Old Testament Priesthood**

At the covenantal marriage of Israel with Yahweh at Mt. Sinai, the Lord proclaimed His Bride to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” (Ex 19:6). Within this sacred royal priesthood, however, Aaron and his male descendants were set apart by divine mandate to serve as priests before Yahweh, assisted by their tribal brothers, the Levites. Theirs was an office of mediation, in which they represented the people before Yahweh and Yahweh blessed the people through them; they embodied Israel before God and through their bodies God ministered to Israel. The priests taught the Word of God; offered sacrifices on the temple altar; prayed for the nation; and placed the holy, saving name of Yahweh on the people through the Aaronic benediction. Through Word and through blood imbued with the divine presence, the priests transmitted purity, peace, forgiveness, and wisdom to the saints of old. They, by faith alone, perceived every burnt animal, every priest, and every blessing as a foretaste of the sacrifice to come, the priest to come, and the benediction to come in the incarnate Messiah of God.

Into this sacerdotal office the Aaronic priests were called and ordained; they did not take the honor upon themselves (Heb 5:4). The modern mantra, “Everyone a minister,” was condemned not only vocally but violently by the God of Israel. When the Levite Korah and his fellow cronies jealously challenged the exclusivity of the Aaronic priesthood, the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up Korah and his household; then the raging wrath of divine fire cremated 250 other rebels (Num 16). Although all Israelites were holy and the nation a kingdom of priests, not all were called to be priestly ministers through whose hands and mouths Yahweh blessed the people with the sacrificial means of grace.

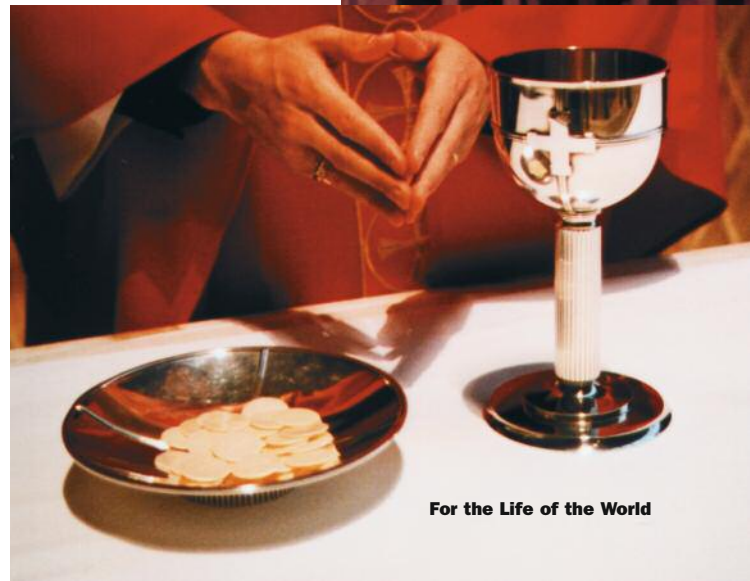
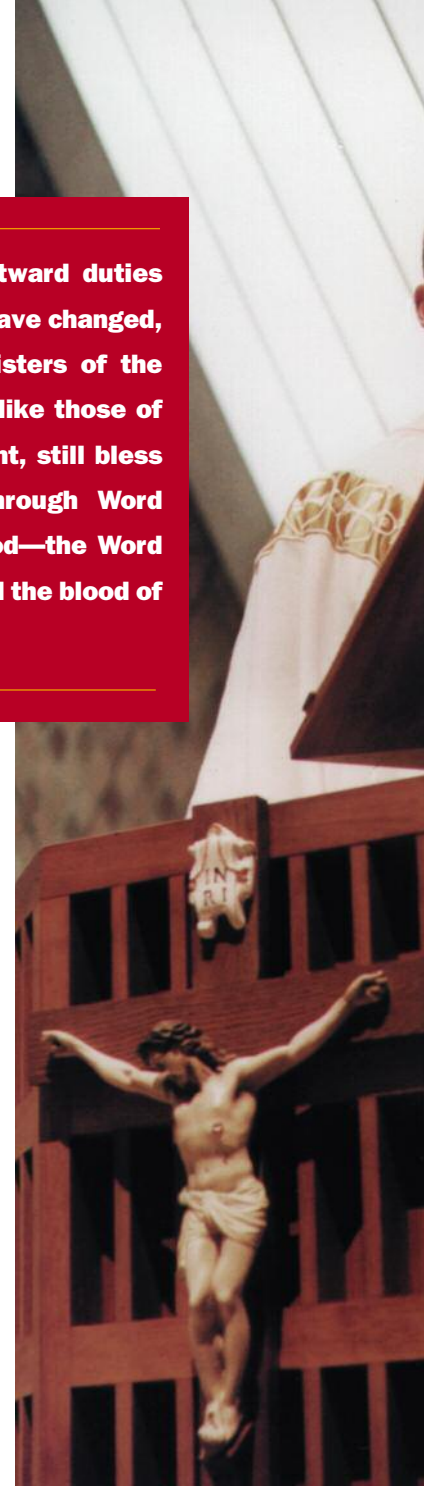
### **The New Testament Priesthood**

The Messiah Jesus is the Priest of the New Testament. Although the Aaronic priesthood foreshadowed the priesthood of Jesus, He was ordained a priest according to the superior order of Melchizedek (Heb 7). In the divine body of Jesus, the temple, priesthood, sacrifice, veil, and mercy seat of the Israelites coalesced, was perfected, and fulfilled for the life of the world. He, and He alone, is the “great Priest over the house of God,” (Heb 10:21), that is, the Church.

Not citizenship in Israel but baptismal incorporation into the priestly body of Jesus makes Christians priests (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). This regal priesthood, originating in the Font, reaches its Sabbath apex at the Altar, where saints step into the unveiled Holy of Holies to consume perpetually the body and blood sacrificed once and for all. In faith towards God and in fervent love for one another, the priests of the New Testament, filled with the sacrificial fruits of Jesus, then offer up their bodies and all that is theirs as a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God (Rom 12:1).

Just as under the old covenant, however, from within the royal priesthood certain men are set aside by divine mandate to serve as priestly ministers before God. The temple now Christ’s flesh, the blood of God spilled, the veil covering the Holy of Holies rent in twain, the atonement of humanity accomplished, God instituted the Office of the Holy Ministry (cf. Augsburg Confession, V) that men may obtain faith in this work of redemption. Although the outward duties of the vocation have changed, the priestly ministers of the New Testament, like those of the Old Testament, still bless God’s people through Word and through blood—the Word of the Gospel

**Although the outward duties of the vocation have changed, the priestly ministers of the New Testament, like those of the Old Testament, still bless God’s people through Word and through blood—the Word of the Gospel and the blood of the Eucharist.**





and the blood of the Eucharist. St. Paul links the Old Testament and New Testament priestly minister in 1 Cor 9:13-14, "Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share with the altar? So also the Lord has directed those who proclaim the Gospel to get their living from the Gospel." As the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (XIII 9) succinctly states, "Thus priests are not called to make sacrifices that merit forgiveness of sins for the people, as in the Old Testament, but they are called to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments to the people;" (cf. Ap XXIV 34, 48, 58-59). The High Priest Jesus beckons His baptized people into the sanctified sphere of His divine presence to feed them through the mouths and hands of those whom He has called and ordained to give out His gifts.

For the comfort, assurance, and welfare of His Church, Christ has maintained the uncompromising division between those baptized into the royal priesthood and those called and ordained into the priestly ministry. This is not a barrier of the Law but a blessing of the Gospel, for the saints of Christ must know whose mouth and whose hands the great High Priest has sanctified to bestow His gifts. The Old Testament anathema against the "everyone a minister" falsehood remains in force; it behooves us to remember Korah.

### Conclusion

The priestly character of the New Testament ministry is rooted in and flows from the priestly office of the One who speaks and acts through those called and ordained. Because Jesus is the Priest of God, those who, in the stead and by the mandate of Christ, absolve, preach, catechize, and celebrate the Sacrament, are His priestly ministers. They do not mediate between God and the people; rather, they beckon people to the temple of the Absolution, the Font, the Altar, and the Pulpit, in which the priestly Mediator, Jesus Christ, has located Himself.

*Levites and priests in holy days of yore,  
Upon the altar sacred blood did pour.  
Oxen and sheep killed by the priestly knife,  
Pointed ahead to Him who gives man life.*

*Upon the altar of the cursed tree,  
Hung God's High Priest, whose blood has set us free.  
That holy Lamb lay on the Mercy Seat  
Filling with God all those who His flesh eat.*

*Behind the altar, holy and bloodstained,  
Minister priests whom Christ called and ordained,  
Beckoning baptized saints unto the Feast  
In which the food and drink are God's High Priest.*

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