

A Royal Priesthood Proclaiming God's Praise

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To proclaim God's praise—that is the purpose of this convention. That is the purpose of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. That is the purpose of our districts, of our congregations, and of the more than 400,000 individual Christians comprising our Wisconsin Synod.

In proclaiming God's praise as individual Christians, as congregations, as districts, and as a Synod we are functioning as royal priests. We are exercising our rights and privileges as people whose lives are dedicated “unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father” (Re 1:5, 6).

We identify ourselves as Lutheran Christians. Martin Luther was God's instrument in reforming the Christian Church. When we think of the Reformation, most of us will think first of all of God's grace in restoring the biblical doctrine of justification to the church through Martin Luther. According to this doctrine God justifies, or forgives, sinners freely by His grace for Christ's sake. This forgiveness becomes ours through faith. The doctrine of justification is the cardinal doctrine of the Christian religion. It has been called the doctrine by which the church stands or falls.

Closely related to the doctrine of justification is the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers. This doctrine, too, was restored to the church by God through Martin Luther. According to this doctrine Jesus has made all those who believe in Him “kings and priests unto God and his Father,” as the Apostle John testifies (Re 1:6; cf. also 5:10 and 20:6).

The restoration of this teaching of the Bible produced a radical change in the structure and life of the church. It broke the power of the papacy. It exposed the fraudulence of the Antichrist's arrogant claim that the only way to God was through him and his priests.

Like the doctrine of justification, the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers is rich in comfort. It assures us that we who believe in Jesus can “come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (He 4:16). We can come to that throne of grace directly. We need no human intermediaries. We are a royal priesthood, whose chief purpose in life is to proclaim God's praise.

As early as 1520 in his famous treatise, “The Freedom of a Christian,” Luther issued a ringing declaration of independence from the tyranny of Rome. He sounded a clarion call for a return to the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. He wrote, “All of us who believe in Christ are priests and kings in Christ, as I Pet. 2[:9] says: ‘You are a chosen race, God's own people, a royal priesthood, a priestly kingdom, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.’”¹

Elucidating the nature of our kingship, Luther wrote in that same treatise, “Every Christian is by faith so exalted above all things that, by virtue of a spiritual power, he is lord of all things without exception, so that nothing can do him any harm. As a matter of fact, all things are made subject to him and are compelled to serve him in obtaining salvation.”²

With respect to our priesthood, Luther insisted, “Not only are we the freest of kings, we are also priests forever, which is far more excellent than being kings, for as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things. These are the functions of priests, and they cannot be granted to any unbeliever. Thus Christ has made it possible for us, provided we believe in him, to be not only his brethren, co-heirs, and fellow-kings, but also his fellow-priests.”³

¹ LW 31:354.

² Ibid.

³ LW 31:355.

Luther sums up these divine truths which the Holy Spirit led him to rediscover in the Scriptures in these words: “Who then can comprehend the lofty dignity of the Christian? By virtue of his royal power he rules over all things, death, life, and sin, and through his priestly glory is omnipotent with God because he does the things which God asks and desires ... To this glory a man attains, certainly not by any works of his, but by faith alone.”⁴

Three years later in another treatise, which was entitled, “Concerning the Ministry,” and which he addressed to the senate in Prague, Luther again emphasized this truth. “All Christians are priests, and all priests are Christians,” he asserted.⁵

In his commentary on Psalm 110, published in 1539, he returned to this subject once more and declared, “Every baptized Christian is, and ought to be, called a priest, just as much as St. Peter or St. Paul. Thus we all, as I have said before, have become priest’s children through Baptism. Therefore it should be understood that the name ‘priest’ ought to be the common possession of believers just as much as the name ‘Christian’ or ‘child of God.’ ”⁶

This doctrine of the royal priesthood of all Christians is part and parcel of our heritage as Lutherans. If we are to retain this heritage, it is vital that we diligently search the Scriptures so as to grasp this truth more fully and apply it more faithfully in our daily lives. For we do not hold to this doctrine merely because Luther taught it, but because it is the teaching of the Bible.

We shall divide our study into two parts. The first part, *A Royal Priesthood by God’s Grace*, will deal with the basis and nature of our royal priesthood. In the second part, *A Royal Priesthood to God’s Glory*, we shall consider the aim and purpose of our royal priesthood. It is our assignment to explore these truths in this essay in a general way. The specific application will be made in the three satellite essays that are to follow. They will show how we as royal priests proclaim God’s praises in the church, in the home, and in the world.

I. A Royal Priesthood by God’s Grace

The expression “royal priesthood” immediately brings to mind the familiar passage in I Peter 2:9, 10, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light: which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God; which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.” Luther, you will remember, cited this passage as the basis for his assertion, “All of us who believe in Christ are kings and priests.”⁷ Because this is the key passage for the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers, it is deserving of careful study.

It is important to note, first of all, to whom Peter is addressing these words. His salutation at the beginning of this epistle indicates that he is writing to Christians in Asia Minor, the land called Turkey today. He calls them “God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood” (1:1, 2, NIV). He goes on to describe them as people to whom God has given a “new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (1:3, 4, NIV). He reminds them that through faith they “are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (1:5, NIV) despite the fact that now for a little while their faith might be tested in all kinds of trials. “Though you have not seen him,” he says, “you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1:8, 9, NIV). Then he encourages these Christians to live their Christian faith. “Just as he who called you is holy,” he says, “so be holy in all you do” (1:15, NIV).

⁴ LW 31:355f.

⁵ LW 40:19.

⁶ LW 13:330f.

⁷ LW 31:354.

In the second chapter Peter urges his readers to crave pure spiritual milk so that by it they may grow in their salvation. He exhorts them to draw closer to Christ, the living Stone, which is the God-appointed, precious Cornerstone of the church. He reminds them that they, too, have been added as living stones to this spiritual building. God's purpose, he says, is that they might be "a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (2:5, NIV).

Citing a passage from the prophet Isaiah (28:16), Peter assures them that those who put their trust in this Stone will never be put to shame. "Now to you who believe," he notes, "this stone is precious" (2:7, NIV). But to "those who do not believe" the words of the Old Testament prophets apply that the stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner (Ps 118:22). It is "a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall" (2:8, NIV; cf. Is 8:14).

Here Peter is therefore contrasting those who believe in Jesus with those who do not believe. He is addressing himself to the believers when he says, "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people." He directs these words to the whole body of believers, not to a special, elite group of them. He is not speaking to a special order in the church, not to a select few. Nowhere in this epistle has there been a hint that Peter is addressing the clergy and excluding the laity when he writes, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood," and again, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (2:5, 9, NIV).

The point Peter is making is that all who believe in Jesus constitute one holy, special people. They live as "strangers and pilgrims" among the unbelievers (1:1; 2:11). They may be separated from one another by barriers of race, language, culture, education, social position, and distance. They may even, as in our day, be separated from one another by denominational fences. Nevertheless, all Christians are united by their faith in Christ into one race, one priesthood, one nation, one people. They are the *Una Sancta*, the one holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints.

Christians are a *priesthood*, that is, a body of group of priests. The repetition of this thought (v. 5 and v. 9) gives special emphasis to it. God has placed believers as living stones into His spiritual house, the church, for this very purpose. They are "to be a *holy* priesthood" (v. 5).

We Christians are priests of God through faith in Christ Jesus, our great High Priest, who has made us a holy priesthood. He is the antitype of the Levitical priests of the Old Testament. In Israel the priesthood was restricted to the house of Aaron, who belonged to the tribe of Levi. It was the special right of the Aaronitic priests to draw near to God (Ex 19:22; Lv 10:3). They stood before Him and served Him in the tabernacle and later in the temple (2 Chr 29:11).

The priests of the Old Testament were called "holy" because they were separated by God from the rest of the people for special service in His sanctuary. They served as mediators between God and the people. Hebrews 5:1 says, "Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (NIV).

Only the priests were permitted to enter the Holy Place of the tabernacle or temple, and only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, where God dwelt between the cherubim. Even he could enter this innermost sanctuary only once a year on the great Day of Atonement. And then, when he went behind the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, he had to take incense with him so that its smoke would cover the mercy seat and he would not die (Lv 16:13).

It was the work of the Old Testament priests to bring sacrifices to God. These were of two basic kinds, sin or guilt offerings, and thank offerings. The sin offerings were bloody. Blood had to be shed to make atonement for the soul (Lv 17:11). "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (He 9:22, NIV). Of course, the blood of the bulls and goats the Old Testament priests offered could not in itself take away sins (He 10:4). It had this effect only because of the command and promise of God. It pointed ahead as a type to the blood that would be shed by Christ, the spotless Lamb of God, who was, as we sing in the words of an ancient hymn, "Himself the Victim and Himself the Priest."⁸

⁸ "Draw Nigh and Take the Body of the Lord," *The Lutheran Hymnal*, 307:1.

As our “great High Priest” (He 4:14), Jesus entered with His own blood into the heavenly Holy of Holies and obtained eternal redemption for us sinners (He 9:12). He entered heaven itself to appear in God’s presence as our Mediator and Redeemer (He 9:24). Now all of us who believe in Him have full forgiveness for all our sins. Sin no longer separates us from God. No longer do the words apply to us, “Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear” (Is 59:2). Now, through faith in our Savior Jesus Christ, we are all priests, who can draw near to God without fear. We can approach the throne of grace boldly and confidently (He 4:16).

The Epistle to the Hebrews explains in detail that Christ, the antitype, is a far greater priest than the Old Testament types. The sacrifices of the Levitical priests had to be repeated. Day after day, morning and evening, the smoke of the sacrifices that they offered ascended to heaven. But Jesus offered one sacrifice for sins for all time and then sat down at the right hand of God (He 10:12).

Because the Old Testament priests were themselves sinners, they first had to make atonement for their own sins. Only then could they make atonement for the sins of the people (He 7:27). But Christ, our perfect High Priest, had no sin. “Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (He 7:26, 27, NIV).

While the Levitical priests of the Old Testament served only for a limited time since they died and others took their place, Christ’s priesthood is eternal and unchangeable (He 7:23, 24). He always lives to intercede for us (He 7:25).

There was a difference also in the way Christ and the Levitical priests received their priesthood. Aaron and his descendants became priests by the Law of God, but Christ was made a priest by a special oath sworn by God. Psalm 110 tells us, “The Lord hath sworn and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek” (Ps 110:4; cf. He 7:20f.).

The fact that Christ is a priest like Melchizedek also points to the superiority of His priesthood over that of the Old Testament priests. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews elaborates on this point in the seventh chapter of his letter.

Melchizedek was a priest of the most high God hundreds of years before the Lord established the Aaronitic priesthood in the Law He gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai. He was also a king. He ruled over Salem, which was later called Jerusalem. In Genesis 14 we are told how Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek when he returned from defeating the four kings of the east who had carried off his nephew Lot. The writer to the Hebrews emphasizes that this indicates the superiority of Melchizedek’s priesthood to that of the Levitical priests, who were descendants of Abraham.

Melchizedek was a type of Christ. His name means “king of righteousness,” and “Salem,” the name of his city, means “peace.” Jesus is the true King of Righteousness (Jr 23:6), and His people enjoy perfect peace.

Like Melchizedek, Jesus is both a king and a priest. In this respect He is different from the priests of Israel. The Levitical priests were not kings, and the kings of Israel were not priests. But, like Melchizedek, Christ holds both offices. He is not only a priest, but also a king.

Furthermore, as our High Priest Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant than the covenant of the Law, which God established with Israel on Sinai (He 8:6–13). He is the mediator of the covenant of the Gospel. This was the covenant of which God spoke when He said through Jeremiah, “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jr 31:33, 34). The covenant of the Gospel “was established upon better promises” than the covenant of the Law (He 8:6).

At Sinai God had given Israel the promise, “If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people; for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Ex 19:6). This was a conditional promise, and Israel miserably failed

to meet these conditions. As a nation it did not fulfill its obligations under this bilateral covenant. As a people they rebelled against the Lord and disobeyed His commandments.

But the fulfillment of the covenant which God has established with us through Christ is not dependent on what we do. It is, like the covenant God made with Abraham (Gn 17), a unilateral covenant. It is an outright promise that God makes to us. It is unconditional, with no strings attached. It is a covenant of grace.

Through Isaiah the Lord graciously extends an invitation to all to enjoy the blessings of His Gospel covenant: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost ... Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my unfailing kindnesses promised to David” (Is 55:1, 3, NIV). To all who accept this gracious invitation He says, “You will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God” (Is 61:6, NIV).

It is this promise that Peter is referring to when he says, “You are a holy priesthood.” This is our high status. This is our noble office. Through faith in Christ we now share in the blessings of God’s covenant of grace.

These blessings are ours because Christ, our great High Priest, has won them for us. We hold the exalted position of being holy priests because He has conferred it on us. Think of it—we are holy priests! We are holy because God, according to His promise, has for Jesus’ sake forgiven our iniquity. He no longer remembers our sin. The same God who demands, “Be ye holy, for I am holy” (1 Pe 1:16), has declared us holy. He sent His own dear Son to sanctify and cleanse the church “with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:26, 27).

How unstinting, how amazing is the grace of God! We are holy, not because our lives are perfect, but solely because God in His rich grace covers all our unrighteousness with the spotless robe of Christ’s perfect righteousness. Without any merit or worthiness on our part He imputes or credits Christ’s impeccable righteousness to us.

As priests we who believe in Jesus can now approach God directly. We have free access to His throne. We can come into His presence with our prayers and petitions. That is our right and privilege. It is the right and privilege of every Christian. One believer does not stand closer to God than another. None has more ready access to God than another. The entire family of believers is a priestly congregation, an assembly of holy priests, all of whom have unrestricted and unlimited access to the Lord most high, the God of heaven and earth.

But Peter describes our priesthood not only as holy (2:5), but also as royal (2:9). It is royal or kingly because we are not only priests, but also kings. This is a priesthood that is made up of kings. Like Jesus, who was a priest after the order of Melchizedek, all who believe in Him are both priests and kings. They enjoy the dignity, honor, glory, authority, and power that accrue to kings.

Jesus is a king. He established His kingdom by His innocent sufferings and death and by His triumphant resurrection and ascension into heaven. He now sits at God’s right hand and reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords (Re 19:16). Although men do not yet see Him ruling in glory and majesty, the day is coming, as He told Caiaphas, when they will “see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven” (Mt 26:64).

In His grace Jesus now shares the trophies of His victory with us, His brothers and sisters in the family of God (Mt 12:50). Listen to His precious promise: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Re 3:21, NIV).

In the vision which John records in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Revelation he tells us, “I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Re 20:4).

Christ’s kingdom is, as we know, a spiritual, not an earthly kingdom. It is not of this world (Jn 18:36). It does not come visibly; He lives and reigns in men’s hearts (Lk 17:21).

The kingship of all who are co-regents with Christ is therefore also a spiritual reign. It is a rule exercised, like Christ's, through the Gospel, the means by which Jesus enters men's hearts and delivers them from the dominion of the devil. As kings who reign together with Christ we Christians have power over sin and Satan, over death and hell.

When Peter says, "You are a royal priesthood," he is pointing to our dual office. We are both priests and kings. The Apostle John likewise applies both of these lofty titles to Christ's followers as he sings a doxology to Him "that loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father" (Re 1:6). We note also that the saints in heaven glorify the Lamb for the dual dignity He has bestowed on them as they sing the new song of the redeemed: "Thou wast slain, and has redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth" (Re 5:9, 10).

As has been indicated, Peter was drawing on the Lord's words in Exodus 19:6 for the thought that God's people are a royal priesthood. God had said, "Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests." But also the other lofty titles that Peter applies to us Christians in verse 9, "a chosen generation," "an holy nation," "a peculiar people," are taken from the Old Testament, not in the form of direct quotations, but as allusions.

Peter designates us first of all as "a chosen generation." We are people whom God has elected or chosen as His own. In his farewell to Israel Moses reminded them, "The Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth" (Dt 7:6). He pointed out that God did not choose them for any reason other than His grace. He told them, "The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the Lord loved you" (Dt 7:7). Through the prophet Isaiah God repeatedly impressed on Israel that He had chosen them (Is 43:10, 20; 44:1, 2; 45:4).

As God chose Abraham and his descendants and made them His special people, so He has chosen all of us who believe in Christ. We are His spiritual Israel. Those who believe are the true children of Abraham (Ga 3:7; Rm 9:6). Paul writes to the Ephesians, "He [that is, God] chose us in him [namely, in Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves" (Eph 1:4–6).

God's election is a matter of grace, pure grace. From eternity, before we ever existed, He chose us individually, set His love on us, and determined to make us His own. Then in the fulness of time He redeemed us with the blood of His Son. Now He is carrying out His decree. He has called us by the Gospel, worked faith in our hearts, and is preserving that faith as He graciously guides us to our heavenly goal. Yes, indeed, we Christians, though we are scattered throughout the world as strangers and pilgrims here on earth, are a chosen generation!

"An holy nation"—this is another noble title that Peter accords to us. The attribute "holy" corresponds to the holiness he ascribed to our priesthood in verse 5. A holy nation is again something that God, according to Exodus 19:6, wanted Old Testament Israel to be: "Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." But what Israel as a nation failed to be, the New Testament church has in fact become. It is a holy nation, separated from all that is sinful and unholy. It is this in the eyes of God because the blood of His Son has washed away all its unrighteousness and sin. God has imputed Christ's holiness to it. Now the Savior, who lives in our hearts by faith, sanctifies us through His Spirit so that day by day we grow in holiness and righteousness. As priestly people who daily serve the thrice holy God, we reflect and radiate His holiness in our lives. Though we still have many faults and blemishes, we struggle against our sinful flesh and strive to conform our lives ever more perfectly to that which is our true nature as a holy people.

In Psalm 110:3 David describes God's people as dressed "in the beauties of holiness." This is a reference to the beautiful priestly garments God commanded Moses to make for Aaron and his sons (Ex 28:2–43). They are described as "holy" and "for glory and for beauty" (Ex 28:2). Such garments, David says, are worn by Christ's people.

And what are they? Luther explains that they are “nothing else than the beautiful, divine, and various gifts of the Holy Spirit.”⁹ Christians, Luther says, “must be completely holy priests and possess holy adornment; for He who ordains Christians as priests is a Person different from anyone else. He is the one High Priest Jesus Christ ... The chrism, anointing, and priestly ordination He bestows is quite different; it is the Holy Spirit who adorns them in glory and holiness and clothes them in His power and with His gifts. It is He who must dwell in the people who are to be priests before God.”¹⁰

“A peculiar people” is still another lofty title Peter applies to Jesus’ disciples to indicate their dignity and nobility. This is one of the expressions in the King James Version that is probably generally misunderstood. Much better is the NIV rendering, “a people belonging to God.” The thought is that God has purchased us to be His own personal possession. This title again reflects God’s promise to Israel in Exodus 19, “If ye will obey my voice indeed and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine” (Ex 19:5).

We belong to God because He bought us. “Ye are bought with a price,” Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians (1 Cor 6:20). We know the price our heavenly Father paid for us. He redeemed us, not with gold or silver, but with the holy, precious blood of His only-begotten Son (1:18, 19). Paul reminds Titus of this, too, recalling for him that our Savior, Jesus Christ, “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own” (Tt 2:14, NIV). In this way God fulfilled the promise He had made through Malachi, “They shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels” (Mal 3:17).

Moses says, “The Lord’s portion is his people: Jacob is the lot of his inheritance ... He kept him as the apple of his eye” (Dt 32:9, 10). What love, what grace God has shown to us, His spiritual Jacob! He sacrificed His dearest treasure to purchase us for Himself, and He has promised, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jr 31:33; 2 Cor 6:16). We will be His special treasure not only in time, but for all eternity (Re 21:3).

Peter continues by reminding us of a further demonstration of God’s love. He “called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.” Darkness represents hopelessness and despair. When we were without Christ, before we came to faith, we had no hope and were without God in the world (Eph 2:12). Because of our sins we deserved to be hurled into the outer darkness of hell, where there is only weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But God called us by the Gospel. His mighty Word worked faith in our hearts. That was a miracle as stupendous as that which He performed on the first day of creation. Paul compares these two events when he recalls for the Corinthians that “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). As a result of God’s gracious call, we are now “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.”

Peter concludes this section by reminding his readers, who were for the most part former Gentiles, “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (2:10, NIV). With these words he once again alludes to the Old Testament. Through the prophet Hosea God had said, “I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God” (Ho 2:23).

When Israel proved unfaithful to the Lord and became guilty of spiritual adultery, God showered His mercy on the Gentiles. He made people who were not of Abraham’s blood Abraham’s seed. He had foretold this through Moses, saying, “They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities: and I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation” (Dt 32:21).

That God has grafted Gentiles like you and me, who were wild branches, into the olive tree of His church, that He has made us, who were not His people, into a people who belong to Him, is an act of grace, sheer grace. Who were your ancestors? Probably they were similar to mine—pagans who worshiped such non-existent Teutonic idols as Woden, Thor, and Freya.

⁹ LW 13:294.

¹⁰ LW 13:295.

And what are we now? “A chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God!” Of these four terms, “priesthood” receives the emphasis, as we can see from the fact that Peter repeats it, having mentioned it previously in verse 5, and from the fact that the function which he ascribes to us is that of priests, namely, to show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. With these words he points out the aim and purpose of our priesthood. As royal priests we are to magnify God’s glory.

II. A Royal Priesthood to God’s Glory

The function of priests is to offer sacrifices, to make intercessions and prayers, and to pronounce benedictions. These were the functions of the Levitical priests. They are the functions of Christ as our great High Priest, and they are our functions as royal priests.

Daily the Levitical priests offered the sacrifices prescribed in the Law of Moses. As was mentioned previously, in addition to the sin or guilt offerings, they offered sacrifices of thanksgiving. The former were propitiatory, the latter eucharistic.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession defines a propitiatory sacrifice as “work which makes satisfaction for guilt and punishment, i.e., one that reconciles God, or appeases God’s wrath, or which merits the remission of sins for others.”¹¹ It defines a eucharistic sacrifice, on the other hand, as one “which does not merit the remission of sins or reconciliation, but is rendered by those who have been reconciled, in order that we may give thanks or return gratitude for the remission of sins that has been received, or for other benefits received.”¹²

The Apology also points out that there has in fact been “only one propitiatory sacrifice in the world, namely, the death of Christ.”¹³ It cites the Epistle to the Hebrews, which says, “It is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins” (10:4). As we have pointed out earlier, according to the same epistle, “we are sanctified by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (10:10). The Levitical propitiatory sacrifices were propitiatory because they pointed ahead to the sacrifice that the promised Savior would make for the sins of the world. Isaiah referred to this sacrifice when he foretold that the Lord would make His righteous Servant’s soul “an offering for sin” (Is 53:10).

Because Christ’s sacrifice was a perfect, final, and all-sufficient propitiation for sin, there is no more need for sacrifices of this type. Rome’s claim that in the mass the priest offers Christ’s body and blood to God in an unbloody propitiatory sacrifice both for the living and the dead is a blasphemous insult to the Savior’s work. This claim, which was boldly enuntiated by the Council of Trent, has not been revoked.¹⁴ On the contrary, the Second Vatican Council restated and reemphasized it. It declared, “As often as the sacrifice of the cross in which ‘Christ, our passover, has been sacrificed’ (1 Cor 5:7) is celebrated on an altar, the work of our redemption is carried on.”¹⁵ It asserted that priests are appointed “to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.”¹⁶ Such a priesthood does not serve to glorify God. It robs Him of His glory.

Peter specifies very clearly what our function as a royal priesthood is. He says that we are “to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (2:5). We Christians have been born again through the Spirit (Jn 3:5). We have been filled with the Spirit, who dwells in us (1 Cor 3:16). We are “a spiritual house” and spiritual priests, whose sacrifices are also spiritual. These sacrifices originate with the Spirit, are brought through the Spirit, and are permeated with the Spirit. Peter calls these sacrifices “spiritual,” as the Apology of the Augsburg Confession explains, because the word “spiritual” “refers to the movements of the Holy Ghost in us.”¹⁷

¹¹ Art. XXIV, 19; Trig., 389.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Art. XXIV, 22; Trig., 391.

¹⁴ Cf. Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Sees. XXII, Chap. II and Canons III and IV.

¹⁵ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Chap. I, 3.

¹⁶ Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Chap. I, 3.

¹⁷ Art. XXIV, 26; Trig., 391.

These are not sacrifices to atone for sins, but sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving for the salvation that our Savior, Jesus Christ, has won for us. They flow from grateful hearts and pour forth from thankful lips. The Epistle to the Hebrews exhorts us, “By him [namely, Jesus] therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name” (He 13:15). In joyful faith we will lift our voices to God “in psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs, giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 5:19, 20). We will worship Him “in spirit and in truth” (Jn 4:24), that is, in the words of the Apology, “from the heart, with heartfelt fear and cordial faith.”¹⁸

But also the good works which we Christians do out of thankful love are sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise. In the first chapter of his First Epistle Peter admonishes us, “Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do” (1:15, NIV). He encourages us, “Love one another deeply, with all your hearts” (1:22, NIV). He begins the second chapter with the exhortation, “Rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy, and slander of every kind” (2:1, NIV). The writer to the Hebrews expressly describes our good works as sacrifices: “Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (He 13:16, NIV).

Paul speaks similarly. He begins the hortatory section of his letter to the Romans with the admonition, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship” (Rm 12:1, NIV). In grateful appreciation for God’s mercy we will dedicate our whole life to God’s service. We will joyfully place all our members, our eyes and ears, mouth and tongue, hands and feet, together with all our talents and powers, our gold and silver into the service of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us (Ga 2:20). Whether we eat, or drink, or whatsoever we do, we will do all to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).

In Psalm 110 David speaks about the willing service which the Lord’s priestly people will render to Him. An English translation of Luther’s rendering of the third verse reads, “After Thy victory Thy people will willingly make sacrifice to Thee in holy adornment.”¹⁹ Luther’s description of the service and sacrifice of God’s New Testament people is classic:

When people learn to know Christ through the Gospel, when they believe that they obtain God’s forgiveness of their sins through Christ and become acceptable to God for Christ’s sake, the right service of God develops as a consequence within the heart. Where such a faith exists, the Holy Spirit also works in the heart, as we have said before, so that a man develops such a desire and love for God that he wants to obey Him. Such a man begins to fear God with all his heart, he trusts Him under all conditions of his life, he calls upon Him in all his needs, he is steadfast, in the confession of His Word, by His life he praises God before all the world, and for His sake he suffers and bears whatever God is pleased to send him. Such are genuine and true forms of service, and they please God very well because they are done with faith in Christ. They proceed from within the heart, which has now become “a new creation” in Christ, as St. Paul calls it in Galatians 6:15.²⁰

Luther points out that the whole system of the Old Testament has been set aside. Its regulations were established temporarily for the Jews. Its ceremonies, he says, “were intended to be understood as pictures or symbols, to remind those people of the promise of Christ until He came to establish the right service of worship of God which the Law typified. Therefore the old form of worship stopped of itself when Christ came to create a new form of service and new servants of God through the Gospel.”²¹

¹⁸ Art. XXIV, 27; Trig., 393.

¹⁹ LW 13:284. Luther’s translation of the verse is: “*Nach deinem Sieg wird dir dein Volk williglich opfern in heiligem Schmuck.*”

²⁰ LW 13:293.

²¹ Ibid.

In the Apology Melanchthon lists as sacrifices of praise “the preaching of the Gospel, faith, prayer, thanksgiving, confession, the afflictions of saints, yea, all good works of saints.”²² It is such sacrifices that the Lord is speaking about in Malachi 1:11, where He says, “From the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name and a pure offering.”

Melanchthon’s explanation of those words deserves to be heard. He writes:

The very words of the prophet express his meaning. For they first say this, namely, that *the name of the Lord will be great*. This is accomplished by the preaching of the Gospel. For through this the name of Christ is made known, and the mercy of the Father, promised in Christ, is recognized. The preaching of the Gospel produces faith in those who receive the Gospel. They call upon God, they give thanks to God, they bear afflictions for their confession, they produce good works for the glory of Christ. Thus the name of the Lord becomes great among the Gentiles. Therefore *incense* and *pure offering* signify ... all those sacrifices through which the name of the Lord becomes great, namely, faith, invocation, the preaching of the Gospel, confession, etc.²³

All of the spiritual sacrifices that we Christians offer will be, Peter says, “acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (2:5). Despite the fact that because of our Old Adam a great deal of unwillingness, sluggishness, indifference, disinclination, pride, and selfishness is attached to our good works, and despite the fact that God desires only pure and perfect sacrifices, nevertheless, for Christ’s sake He forgives all the imperfections of our deeds and is pleased to accept them.

The rights and privileges of our priesthood are synonymous with our priestly office and service. As God’s royal priests all of us who believe in Christ have the privilege and responsibility to show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (2:10). We show forth His praises by preaching the Gospel, both with our lips and our lives.

Melanchthon in the Apology explains that “the priesthood of the New Testament is the *ministry of the Spirit*, as St. Paul teaches 2 Cor. 3, 6, ” which “tenders to others the Gospel and the Sacraments, that by means of these they may conceive faith and the Holy Ghost, and be mortified and quickened.”²⁴

In this connection Malachi 3:3 is pertinent. It states, “And he shall purify the sons of Levi and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering of righteousness.” Again we quote Melanchthon’s explanation in the Apology: “The sacrifices of the sons of Levi, i.e., of those teaching in the New Testament, are the preaching of the Gospel, and the good fruits of preaching, as Paul says, Rom. 15, 16: *Ministering the Gospel of God, that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Ghost.*, i.e., that the Gentiles might be offerings acceptable to God by faith.”²⁵

The priesthood of the New Testament is universal. It belongs to all believers. All of them are royal priests. All of them, therefore, also possess the ministry of the Spirit, the authority and right to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. Jesus gave the Great Commission not only to the apostles, but to all His disciples, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19, NIV). Every Christian possesses the Ministry of the Keys, which is “the peculiar authority of the Church, given by Christ to His Church on earth, to forgive the sins of penitent sinners unto them, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent.”²⁶

In his 1521 treatise, “The Misuse of the Mass,” Luther quotes 2 Corinthians 3:6, “Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament, not of the letter, but of the spirit,” and then explains, “These words St.

²² Art. XXIV, 25; Trig., 391.

²³ Apology, Art. XXIV, 32; Trig., 395.

²⁴ Art. XXIV, 59; Trig., 405.

²⁵ Art. XXIV, 34; Trig., 395.

²⁶ Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1956), p 13.

Paul spoke to all Christians, that he might make ministers of the Spirit out of all of them. A minister of the Spirit preaches grace, forgiveness of sins, just as a minister of the letter preaches the words of the law. The latter function belongs to Moses, the former to Christ. Peter speaks to all Christians: ‘That you may declare the might of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light’ [I Pet. 2:9]. Since all Christians are called out of darkness, each one is bound to declare the might of Him who has called him.”²⁷

The Treatise appended to the Smalcald Articles points out that “wherever the Church is, there is the authority to administer the Gospel.” It makes the point that “the keys have been given to the Church, and not merely to certain persons, Matt. 18, 20: *Where two or three are gathered together in My name*, etc..” As proof it cites Peter’s words, “Ye are a royal priesthood,” and asserts that “these words pertain to the true Church.”²⁸

A subject that arises quite naturally in this connection is the question: What is the relationship between the royal priesthood of all believers and the public ministry? As has been said, the royal priesthood, which includes the Ministry of the Keys and the authority to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments, is the common possession of all Christians. But this does not mean that all have the authority and right to use these Keys *publicly*. The word “publicly” in this context is a kind of technical expression that means “in the name and on behalf of one’s fellow Christians.” Such public teaching or preaching is restricted to those who have been called or delegated by their fellow Christians to do this in their name. In Romans 10:15 Paul asks, “How shall they preach except they be sent?”

Luther, therefore, writes, “Although we are all equally priests, we cannot all publicly minister and teach. We ought not do so even if we could.”²⁹ Again he says, “Although we are all priests, this does not mean that all of us can preach, teach, and rule.”³⁰ The Augsburg Confession accordingly asserts, “No one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called.”³¹

Christians function as royal priests, however, when they exercise their right to call pastors and teachers and when they support the public ministry of the Gospel in their midst. The Treatise appended to the Smalcald Articles points out that the church “has the right to elect and ordain ministers since it alone has the priesthood.”³²

Furthermore, in the Holy Scriptures God has set down the qualifications for those who aspire to the office of the public ministry (1 Tm 3; Tt 1). One of the qualifications is the ability to teach. Not all who possess the universal priesthood possess the qualifications for the public ministry, which God has established for the welfare of His church (1 Cor 12:28; Ac 20:28). Those who serve in the various forms of the public ministry are special gifts of Christ to His church (Eph 4:11, 12).

The church may establish such forms according to its need. So we have pastors, teachers, professors, missionaries, synodical officials and executives, vicars, and a number of other kinds of ministers of the Word. These various types of the public ministry are not divinely established as such, but are created by the church as it sees fit. Neither is there a hierarchy or rank among these various kinds of ministries, although the responsibilities and the scope of the work differ. The church determines the responsibilities and scope of the work by means of the call.

If all Christians were to take it upon themselves to preach and teach publicly and to administer the sacraments, chaos and confusion would reign. As Luther points out, “It is precisely because they all have the right and power to preach that it becomes necessary to keep order.”³³ The office of the public ministry does not abolish the universal priesthood. It is a special, divinely instituted office through which Christians exercise their priesthood. There are, of course, also many other ways in which they function as royal priests.

Luther writes about the office of the public ministry:

²⁷ LW 36:149.

²⁸ Tract. 67–69; Trig., 523–525.

²⁹ LW 31:356.

³⁰ LW 13:332.

³¹ Art. XIV; Trig., 49.

³² Tract., 69; Trig., 525.

³³ LW 36:149.

This office cannot be attended to by all the members of a congregation. Neither is it fitting that each household do its own baptizing and celebrating of the Sacrament. Hence it is necessary to select and ordain those who can preach and teach, who study the Scriptures, and who are able to defend them. They deal with the Sacraments by the authority of the congregation, so that it is possible to know who is baptized and everything is done in an orderly fashion. If everyone were to preach to his neighbor or if they did things for one another without orderly procedure, it would take a long time indeed to establish a congregation. Such functions, however, do not pertain to the priesthood as such but belong to the public office which is performed in behalf of all those who are priests, that is, Christians.³⁴

In summary, then, the distinction between the office of preaching, or the public ministry, and the general priesthood of all believers is, as Luther puts it, that “the preaching office is no more than a public service which happens to be conferred upon someone by the entire congregation, all members of which are priests.”³⁵

We Christians exercise our royal priesthood individually by personally telling others about our Savior, and we exercise it jointly with our fellow Christians by establishing, maintaining, and supporting the public ministry in our congregations and in our Synod. It is the purpose of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, as a gathering of Christians, “to serve all people in God’s world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures.”

When we exercise our priesthood in this way, whether individually or jointly, we are proclaiming God’s praises. We are functioning as royal priests to the glory of God. To quote Luther, “Whatever we do, our teaching and our life ought to shine like a beacon of light to the greater knowledge, honor, and praise of God.”³⁶

But praying and making intercession for others is also a function of priests. Jesus prayed (He 5:12; Jn 17). As our High Priest He makes intercession for us (Rm 8:34; He 7:25; 9:24). He is our Advocate with the Father (1 Jn 2:1). He reminds the Father of the atonement He has made for us and pleads our case. He prays that we may continue in the faith and be preserved in grace unto our end.

As royal priests all Christians have the privilege and duty to pray and to make intercession for others. Paul urges that “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men” (1 Tm 2:1). Luther notes that when “a young child who is baptized prays the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer each morning and evening at the table, it is a true prayer; and God hears him. Such a child prays as a Christian priest, born in Baptism and ordained by Christ.”³⁷

We can come to our heavenly Father and pray with all boldness and confidence because we are His dear children through faith in Christ Jesus. He has invited us to pray and promised that He will hear us. When, then, our intercessions are heard, those for whom we have made them will praise and glorify God. In this way also we exercise our royal priesthood to the glory of God.

A third function of priests is to bless in the name of God. Melchizedek blessed Abraham (Gn 14:19, 20), that is, he promised him God’s grace, help, and protection.³⁸ God instructed Aaron and his sons to bless Israel (Nu 6:23–27). Jesus performed this priestly function when He blessed His disciples (Lk 24:50, 51; Jn 20:19, 21). Through Him, as God promised Abraham, all families of the earth will be blessed (Gn 12:3; 22:18). What is that blessing? Luther explains, “By His Word and preaching He proclaims God’s grace and promises us the forgiveness of our sins. Thereby He bestows on us the true priestly benediction.”³⁹

Peter now admonishes us as priests, “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing” (1 Pe 3:9, NIV). Jesus bids us to love our

³⁴ LW 13:334.

³⁵ LW 13:332.

³⁶ LW 13:295.

³⁷ LW 13:334.

³⁸ Cf. Luther, LW 13:318.

³⁹ LW 13:321.

enemies and to bless those who curse us (Mt 5:44). Paul urges, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Rm 12:14, NIV).

To bless means to act as God’s representative in conferring His blessing on others. It means to assure them of God’s grace and forgiveness in Christ. Jesus has given us the authority to forgive sins. He says, “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them” (Jn 20:23). To bless is really, therefore, to preach the Gospel. Citing Malachi 2:7, a passage in which a priest is called “a messenger of God,” Luther says, “The preaching of the Gospel is really the true priestly office.”⁴⁰

“God is love” (1 Jn 4:8), and He wants all to be saved. He wants all people to be blessed forever. When we, then, as royal priests, bless in His name, our blessing redounds to His glory, for those who are saved will praise Him eternally.

As priests and kings it is our privilege and joy to proclaim God’s praises here on earth. This is the chief aim and purpose of our life, for the Lord our God says, “This people have I formed for myself: they shall show forth my praise” (Is 43:21). It is our greatest delight to thank Him for His grace and mercy and to tell others of His wonderful deeds, namely, that Christ has swallowed up death, devoured hell, overcome the devil, and opened the gates to Paradise for all.

Here on earth our praises are, to be sure, often hesitant, faltering and weak. We stutter and stammer. We grope for words and pass up opportunities. But in the world to come our proclamation of God’s praise will be perfect. It will be unrestrained, uninterrupted, and unending. There we will stand in God’s presence continually, dressed in the white robes of Christ’s righteousness and exercising the eternal priesthood He has conferred on us. There we will reign with Christ as kings and lords, sharing in the glory of His eternal kingdom and joyfully acclaiming Him as King of kings and Lord of lords.

The Apostle John caught a glimpse of that glory. He heard the redeemed in heaven sing to the Lamb, “Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests” (Re 5:9, 10). Uniting their voices with thousands upon thousands of angels, the choir of saints chants His praises, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing” (Re 5:12).

What joy that will be when we join that choir! And what an inspiration the anticipation of this joy is for us to proclaim the praises of our High Priest and King here on earth until in God’s appointed hour we join every creature in heaven and on the earth and under the earth in singing an unceasing, eternal hymn of praise: “Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever!” (Re 5:13). Amen!

⁴⁰ LW 13:317.