The Priesthood of All Believers

1 Peter 2:9-10

During the reformation the church recovered the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Christ ministers to every Christian and through Him we minister to others. No clergy or class of believers has a monopoly on ministering the grace of God.

Summary of the Text

Peter writes to Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, a large region above the eastern Mediterranean stretching north to the Black Sea (1 Pet. 1:1). This group of churches would include Jews and Gentiles, and he tells them they are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God's special people set apart to proclaim His praises who called them out of darkness and into His marvelous light (2:9). They knew about the Aaronic priesthood, the family from the tribe of Levi that God set apart to offer sacrifices at the tabernacle and temple (Num. 8:5-22). No one else was allowed to do this. They would be specially anointed to serve at the altar, access the holy place, and once a year the high priest to go into the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. Peter says the whole church partakes of the greater priesthood of Christ. Once they were not part of the people of God but now are; they were without mercy but now through the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ, they have obtained it (v. 10). The mercy doesn't stay still or get locked away but is proclaimed in the praises of God.

Scripture in the Common Tongue

Around 1521 when a learned cleric told William Tyndale, "We are better to be without God's laws than the Pope's", Tyndale replied, "I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause the boy that drives the plow to know more of the scriptures than you!" In 1524 a wealthy merchant offered to fund Tyndale's endeavor to translate the Bible into English and for twelve years he lived as a fugitive in Europe, running for his life as he translated the Hebrew and Greek Bible into English. Finally he got arrested in 1535 and executed in Belgium in 1536. His final words were "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!" This prayer was answered two years later when Henry VIII decreed that the Bible be made available in English in every church throughout England. Tyndale was so talented that about 76% of his Old and 84% of his New Testament translation was retained in the King James Version, the foundation for all modern translations. Luther translated the Bible into German and soon the Bible was available for everyone to read in all their common languages even as Rome demanded only the Latin Vulgate be used. The reformers embraced *sola Scriptura*, the doctrine that Scripture is our highest and only infallible authority, written for all of us. We must read it and check all things by it, even the apostle Paul when he comes to preach (Acts 17:11).

A Priestly People

The connection between the Bible and priesthood of all believers is the content of the ministry. Priests minister to people and intercede for them. The thing they minister is the truth contained in Scripture. If only the clergy were supposed to read and interpret the Bible, it would make sense that ministry would be limited to them. But Scripture was written for all of us (Rom. 15:4; Heb. 4:12). In Roman Catholic theology, grace is like a substance that comes directly from God and is poured into the church proper, into the clergy. You bring your bowl to mass (daily if you're really faithful) to get your distribution. The church has a monopoly on grace and only ordained clergy have the licenses to give (or sell) it. For Roman Catholicism, justification—how you are made right with God—is a matter of infused righteousness. What's infused can be lost, and therefore you better keep at it in order to spend less time in purgatory. But in Scripture justification is a judicial declaration: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28). Faith comes by hearing, and not just clergy can declare the gospel. Not only ministers but the whole church is connected to Christ and therefore each member is a part of His royal priesthood. We still have pastors, elders,

and deacons, but their job is "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:12). They minister and help everyone else to do so in their callings, every person directly connected to Christ. So in our polity, pastors are not members of Presbytery (regional groups of pastors and churches) but of their local churches. As part of the local body of Christ, pastors ought to be connected and accountable to it like any other person. If laymen really are part of the royal priesthood and holy nation, then shepherds better get busy loving and serving them. This is why congregational care flourished in the Reformation. The priesthood of all believers demands it. Also, when people are reading their Bibles, their understanding of how bad sin is and the need to do something about it increases. Martin Bucer wrote *Concerning the True Care of Souls* in 1536 and when Calvin was in exile in Strasbourg for three years, he pastored a congregation of 500 French refugees and learned a lot from Bucer. A priestly people need to love God and know what they're doing. After Calvin was reinstated in Geneva in 1541, he gathered the Company of Pastors every Friday to exegete Scripture, discuss ministry, and challenge one another. These were ministers from Geneva and the surrounding towns, and this became a wheelhouse for training and calling men to care for congregations. The Consistory of elders in the local churches met on Thursdays to work through congregational care that dealt with everything including fighting, theft, adultery, gambling, lying, sleeping in church, practicing folk religion, begging/idleness, and bringing your animal into the church service and distracting people. If the church is Christ's royal priesthood and holy nation, pastors ought to care for them and not refer them out to therapists. You can see how far the Protestant church has fallen from this understanding today. We must recover again the sufficiency of Scripture and devotion to know and apply it.

Proclaiming His Praises

It's encouraging to hear from Peter that we are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people. But what are we supposed to do? Old covenant priests ministered at the tabernacle and temple. The Levites lived in Israel, led worship, and administered justice. What does the priesthood do now? As Protestants embraced the priesthood of all believers, rejecting the dichotomy of a holy clergy and less holy lay congregation, the doctrine of vocation easily followed. All callings are holy and to be done to the glory of God, in service to Him and His kingdom. You're not inferior for not working in the church or some other ministry. We honor the offices of the church and pray for men to fill them, but this is completely different than denigrating "secular" work. Peter's scope for proclaiming God's praises who called you out of darkness is much bigger than one particular vocation. You do this in mundane daily matters—whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). But you also do it in the thing you put the most training, hours, and investment in. Working hard, honestly, and joyfully means your success will draw attention and cause people to wonder why you operate this way, if you haven't told them already. You go to work, you go home, you go to church and into the public square as a priestly representative of Jesus Christ. He has gifted you to proclaim His praises and bless others in a multitude of ways. So offer yourself as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, here in worship and wherever you go.