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THE WORSHIP OF ALL BELIEVERS
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- In the light of changing worship patterns in which preacher no longer leads the whole service, this paper reflects on the underlying theology of priesthood and worship, and the involvement of each and all in both the gathered and the dispersed life of the church.

Local churches in many places are experiencing what are called ‘worship wars’, which take their most common form in struggles over music and the leading of the worship service. Whereas a short time ago it was universally the case, in my context of Australian Baptist life, for the pastor and preacher of the day to ‘take’ the service, which meant that the preacher designed the service, chose the hymns, led the prayers and so forth, as well as preached, today this almost never happens. Other people design and lead the worship and those people almost always are chosen for their musical ability, or at least interest in selecting the music. This form of service has spread throughout many places and is valued because it increases participation. Now at least five or six people have the power of the microphone, rather than one or two.

These changes have not come about without anguish and struggle. As I have indicated, one of the issues has to do with the style of music. Much deeper is the struggle over who actually ‘controls’ the worship of the community and what it means to participate. Inherent in the latter question is the idea that unless people are able to stand at the front of the church service, they are passive, they are less involved. It is here that we find a very direct association with what people think of as the priesthood of all believers.
The priesthood of all believers is not primarily, not even secondarily, about the power of the microphone, or who can do what in the Sunday worship services. The priesthood of all believers is about the life of the whole church as worship, in which we all have both a gift and a calling. When the worship services are the gathering, expression and inspiration of the worship of all the believers, in all aspects of our lives, then all will find that they are indeed participating, not only in a worship event but in the very life and mission of God. This is ‘our reasonable service’ (Rom. 12:1).

To gain some specific grasp on these ideas, I will first look briefly at ideas of priesthood in the Bible, specifically at the suggestion that the church is called to be a priesthood. I will then turn to the subject of worship, seeking to locate all Christian worship theologically, within the context of the life of God. This framework offers a perspective on the priesthood of all believers as the worship of each and of all. On this basis, I will sketch briefly the gathered worship of the church and the dispersed worship of the church, together making the worship of all believers.

Understanding Priesthood

Priesthood in the Bible is generally associated with several crucial ideas or elements, which may be taken together to define this priesthood. Whereas priesthood may predate the Temple, it is most clearly associated with the Temple. Priests were people (1) called or appointed by God, albeit that this calling was mediated through familial and tribal means. The orders of priests (Aaron and Melchizedek) were seen as instituted by God. Only God makes the priests to be priests. These persons were (2) to be closely associated with God: they are to know God and to represent God to the people. But they also called (3) to know the people, and indeed they know the sin and the need of the people and they represent this to God too, as they come into the Temple on their behalf. That brings us to another element in the life of the priests, namely (4) that they were commissioned to make sacrifices and blood offerings on behalf of the people. This activity leads to a further element, (5) that the activity of priests is intimately associated with the gift of God’s salvation. There has been much debate about the
role and need of sacrifices in the ancient Israelite faith. Suffice to say here that it is misleading to represent Old Testament thought as implying that sacrifices in some way created God's forgiveness or salvation. Always, God's forgiveness and grace is God's own gift. In sovereign freedom God may forgive or not forgive. Sacrifices do not create salvation; but the rituals and sacrifices were a means by which the people might receive, appropriate and give thanks for that grace which God offers. Sacrifices and offerings were an effective visual and practical means of restoring a right relationship with the Lord. It should also be remembered that not all priestly offerings were guilt offerings; many were celebrations of thanks and affirmations of trust. As a result, in all their forms the priestly offerings were an essential element in enabling the nation to live God's way. Though they frequently failed, they could be restored and renewed, and further enabled to live into their calling. The priestly office thus enabled Israel to be the Israel of God, the community of God's salvation. To do this, finally but in fact most fundamentally, (6) the priestly office was itself associated with the enabling of the Spirit, signified through the laying on of hands and the anointing with oil.

As already noted, priesthood in the Old Testament was essentially a familial office and status. Numbers 3.1-5 gives a clear indication and example of this familial linkage. With this priestly office, at least at times, went much power to gather and shape the life of the people, and indeed to control and oppress. For this reason, it is important to notice one crucial text which functions to undercut any suggestion of the priestly office as above the nation, namely Exodus 19.6, 6a, which reads: 'Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.'

Exegetical discussion of this verse has included consideration of whether we have here three separate designations of attributes, three tasks, or even three groups, within the nation—a treasured possession, a priestly kingdom or group of priestly kings, and the nation itself called to be holy. The emerging consensus is that all three elements are interlocking: Israel is set apart from other peoples as God's own people, dedicated to serving God in the way that the priests are dedicated
within a nation. Thus, the three phrases - 'treasured possession', 'priestly kingdom' and 'holy nation' all refer to the whole nation.' As God's covenant people, Israel is 'committed to the extension throughout the world of the ministry of Yahweh's presence.' Israel, as John Durham puts it, is to be a kingdom not run by politicians working by strength and connivance, but 'by priests dependent on faith in Yahweh'. In this way God's precious possession will be a holy nation, a demonstration to all peoples of the blessings of covenant relationship with the Holy One.

Critical to our purpose here is the implication that priestly ministry as exercised by the castes of priests serves and represents the macro priesthood of the whole nation. It is in light of this priority that we should understand Isaiah 61.6-7, where a vision of restoration, brought about by the Lord's inspired servant, includes allotting a double portion of provisions for the priests of Jerusalem. Verse 6 reads: 'but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory.' This verse is not taken to refer to the entire nation, but confirms the status of the priests and provides for them. But lest this provision be taken to be Yahweh's primary concern, the passage moves directly on to speak of God's love for justice and hatred of wrong-doing, setting the provision for the priests in the context of the earlier announcement of liberty for the captives, good news for the oppressed—that part of the text which is given prominence when Jesus reads in the synagogue, in Luke 4. The status of and provision for the priesthood is to be integrated with these concerns of the Lord. This is thoroughly consistent with the prophetic oracles in the opening chapter of Isaiah, for example, where the Lord declares a distaste for temple worship and rituals which exist alongside injustice and lack of concern for the destitute. Priesthood, of itself, is not the Lord's concern, even here in Isaiah 61. Priestly ministry exists within the context of, and must serve, the calling of the entire 'kingdom of priests'.

In the New Testament, however, it is startling to observe that not once is the word 'priest' used to describe a person who holds a position or 'office' in the church. The Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Küng, has made this point most trenchantly. His argument is that in the wider society there were numerous words which reflected ideas of
power, hierarchy, office and dominion, and all of these are studiously avoided when discussing the leadership of the churches. Instead the word that is consistently (and deliberately) chosen is our term ‘minister’, διάκονος.

There are priests in the New Testament, however. First, there is one priest, who is our one High Priest, Jesus Christ himself. His priestly office and offering is unique, unsurpassed and not to be repeated. The letter to the Hebrews is our most extended reflection on this theme. We can see that all the six elements I suggested above as involved in the biblical ideas of priesthood are true of Christ: He is clearly called and commissioned by God, and was so much associated with God that he is designated God’s Son; he knows the people—as Mark puts it, he perceived in his spirit what people were murmuring in their hearts (Mark 2.6-8). Jesus is also called to make sacrifices, both in the way of his life and ministry and in his ultimate gift of his life for all the world; and of course for Christian faith this priest is intimately associated with God’s gift of salvation. His very name means ‘Saviour’ and he is the means of God’s saving gift for all the nations. Finally, we see that he is continually enabled and accompanied by the Spirit, and indeed is conceived of the Holy Spirit and is raised by the Spirit. In all these ways, Jesus Christ is the paragon of priesthood, our great High Priest.

There is another priesthood in the New Testament, as well. This is the priesthood of the body, the whole community of believers, the church. The central text here, of course, is 1 Peter 2:9: ‘But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.’ In addition, Revelation 6.10 envisions the fulfilment of this mission to be a kingdom of priests. In 1 Peter 2, the temple imagery is transferred from what is implied as a static situation into what is now dynamic, a lively people, a new people of God. This people of God may include the old people, though the text clearly stresses the new people, those who once were not a people at all, and who did not know God at all. So the metaphors of a building for priestly service are mixed with those of a living body, an active community set aside for service to God. The most important factor here for our purposes, however, is the resonance from Exodus 19: here too
we have a collective priesthood. Here we have the priesthood not of each believer, but the priesthood of all the believers, the church. This is a collective, communal priesthood.

At this point, I would like to pose two questions which will help us to understand further the nature and importance of this collective priesthood of all the church. These are the seemingly simple questions: How and where is priesthood to be exercised? I believe a consideration of these questions will significantly assist us in understanding what the priesthood of all believers actually means for the church today and will greatly enrich its contribution to the life and worship of the church. Peter tells us the purpose of the collective priesthood: to show forth the mighty acts of our saving God. My questions ask exactly what this means for the church today. What seems to me quite crucial is the implication that Christian faith is not an inner matter, a subjective or private concern. The new people, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, are to act out their faith, to show forth the ways of God. This is a priesthood of overt, social and communal life-style.

Here the Lutheran tradition has some things to offer us. For Luther, every Christian has an equal part in the priesthood of the church and, as Timothy George explains, the seven rights which belong to the whole church, namely preaching the Word, baptizing, celebrating Holy Communion, bearing 'the keys', praying for others, making sacrifices and judging matters of doctrine. So for Luther these rights were also tasks and responsibilities — for example, to pray for one another. To say that we are all priests and have no need of any human intermediary in prayer means that in fact we ought to do it, not just assert the freedom to do it! Moreover, as Jürgen Moltmann has expressed it, this Reformation concept saw every Christian as vocatus, that is, called into a ministry, a profession. Not all are called to be pastors in the church, but all are called to lives of ministry as the church, and this ministry may be worked out as a boot-maker, a nurse, or a tax agent, as much as a pastor or preacher. In all these vocations, we are to exercise the priesthood of the whole church.

In the Baptist tradition, Stephen Winward wrote of the corporate priesthood of the church as 'representing the world to God and God to the world'. This priesthood is to take the form not only of worship but also service: not only leitourgia but also diakonia. For the "spiritual
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sacrifices" include not only praises and prayers, but also sharing and loving deeds, gifts of money, evangelistic endeavour, and holy living. Priesthood is expressed not only in worship, but in diakonia and mission. It is an activity towards God and man*. So the answers to my questions about the where and how of our collective priesthood seem to be that we are to offer lives of service to God, both in the worship of the church and in all that we do, in work and home, in neighbourhood and community. All this is the priesthood of the church.

In differing with Winward, however, I now wish to argue that all this collective priesthood must be understood as worship. The collective priesthood of all the church is the worship of all the believers.

THE CONTEXT OF WORSHIP IS THE DIVINE LIFE

In the Christian and Hebrew understandings of God, God is a relational being. The Trinitarian God is in relationship and invites us into continuing relationship with God and with all God's creation. This is life. The worship God desires is an expression of this divine will to relationship; it is our response to and participation in this divine-human relationship, in all aspects of our being.

One way in which I have tried to explain this is through my work on a theology of divine conversation.11 I have put the view that God invites us into genuine conversation with Godself. This can be seen, among other ways, in the scriptures where God asks genuine questions, and invites us to explore and propose our own responses, answers, directions in the conversation. If we look at the biblical texts, I think it is false to imply, as so much theology and teaching does, that the word of God always comes to us as statements which we must believe, or commands we must obey. All the theology of the word of God implies that God is always telling us things to believe or ordering us to do things. In the Bible, however, I find many invitations into conversation, including many genuine questions.

This theology of divine conversation sees God as creating the context for, and provoking, this conversation. God invites conversation and God embodies the divine-human conversation, in the person of Jesus, to show us what this conversation looks like and can be, when human and divine are in constant harmony. Further, God seeks to gather the whole