

When God brought His people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm, He had a particular calling in mind for them. In Exodus 19:5-6, the Lord spoke from Mt. Sinai and said, “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.” As a *treasured possession*, God’s people were first an object of His love; second, as a *kingdom of priests*, they were called as His special servants; and third, as a *holy nation*, their common life was meant to embody peace, righteousness, and justice.

This morning we are focusing on that middle term, the kingdom of priests, and we are applying it to the Church in light of Rev. 1:4-6, which declares that what in Exodus was in the *future* and *depended on keeping the covenant* is fulfilled by Christ. Christ kept the covenant and obeyed God’s voice, and so God made Him a priest forever. But Revelation goes further than this: not only is Jesus a priest, but by His blood and through His love, He includes us in His kingdom and makes us to be priests to God His Father! You are a kingdom of priests.

As we return to our series exploring the Church as the Glorious Body of Christ, we are now considering the idea of *office* in the Church; that is, positions of authority and responsibility in the Church that enable her to carry out her mission. Many of you will be familiar with calling the elders and deacons the officers of the Church, and this is correct, but if we jump straight there, we’ve missed something very important.

This is the most important thing you need to know about office in the Church: *every baptized believer is an officer*. Every believer, by virtue of their baptism, has been ordained to priestly service in God’s house. The office you bear is the office of *member*, which is a position in the Church that carries with it tremendous responsibility, authority, and blessing. You are called to encourage one another with God’s Word, to intercede and pray for one another, to teach and admonish by singing to one another, to restore those who wander, comfort those who suffer, and help those who are weak. Here’s what God wants you to hear and believe: you are called to serve as a member of God’s royal priesthood. As a baptized member of the Church, you are a priest.

I hope you see that this is what is being taught in Rev. 1; for confirmation you can look at 1 Peter 4:9, where the Church is described as a royal priesthood.

This is what is called the *universal* or *general* office, since it is an office that all of God's people share, as opposed to the *special offices* such as elder and deacon. This is one of the great treasures recovered by Martin Luther and the Reformation of the 16th century, leading them to speak of *the priesthood of all believers*, as opposed to viewing only ordained clergy as priests before God. So when you think of elders and deacons as officers, you're not wrong, but if you miss this universal office, then you're going to end up thinking wrongly about Church and missing your priestly calling as a member.

Maybe you've felt like this, or been a part of a Church like this, where it seemed like the elders and deacons *did* the work of the Church, and the members *received* that work, as attenders or spectators. The minister and other leaders provide religious goods and services to the members who come as *recipients* or *consumers*. This is a disastrous way to think of Church in both directions, as we can see in the Church today.

The error of *clericalism* views the ordained clergy as a special class of people with unique access to God and a set of special powers and privileges. This can take a high church form, as in Roman Catholicism, or a low-church form, where the phrase "touch not the Lord's anointed" is used to shield the pastor and other leaders from criticism and accountability. The idea of clericalism has covered up or excused a great deal of pastoral sin, which is now regularly being exposed, resulting in a crisis of authority in the Church. People struggle to trust spiritual leaders, in large part because those leaders were on top of a pedestal that they never should have been on, rather than being seen as fellow priests who were called to a particular task.

But from the other direction, when the congregation sees itself as primarily *consumers of religious services*, they fall into the habits of consumer culture, viewing the "worship experience" as something to be evaluated and critiqued, rather than as joint participation in God's mission. If you as a church member are merely *attending a performance* or *reviewing a product*, your discipleship is being warped, and it becomes too easy to talk about "the Church" as something other than yourself. "The Church should do more of this, the Church shouldn't do that, I wish the Church would x,y,z..." But priests don't go to church to *get* something; priests are there to *serve*.

And so simply remembering and being reminded that you hold office in the Church ought to transform the language of *criticism* into the language of *participation*. As one pastor put it, one of the most powerful habits that you can pick up in your office as a priest is to *refuse* to say as a consumer, “I want...”, and *instead* say as a Church member “I will...”¹

And it’s important to remember that the priesthood is not a *job that you do*, where you clock in and clock out, but a *calling* that shapes who you are. You are a priest your whole life! And just to make sure you aren’t confused, when I say “priest”, I mean “church member”. But I want us to keep using the term “priest” so that we think of ourselves as *servants in God’s house*, where sometimes “church member” too quickly slides into “attender”. You are not just an attender; you are a priest. An attender *passively receives*; a priest *actively serves*. So how are you called to serve as a priest?

It’s important to note that the action that we think of first when we think of priests in the Bible is *sacrifice*, and this is the one action that we no longer do as priests! In the OT, a major part of the priestly role was as mediators between God and men, and so a huge part of being a priest was offering sacrifices. But in the New Covenant, Jesus has made a once-for-all sacrifice that completes this mediator role. No more atoning sacrifices! Jesus is the only mediator, based on His finished work on the cross. So if we aren’t offering sacrifices to atone for sin, how do we serve as New Covenant priests?

Even in the OC, sacrifice was only one of many priestly responsibilities. The priests were responsible to lead in worship, to teach God’s Word to His people, to deal with sin and uncleanness, to guard the sanctuary, and still more besides. As we consider our priestly service today, I want us to continue looking through the lenses of worship, community, and mission.

First, consider your priestly role in worship. As we think about the Church gathered, one of the things that sets our Church and our denomination apart is our liturgy, our pattern of worship, not only what we do in our service, but *who it is* that is doing it. Because we believe that all of God’s people are priests, and worship is our key priestly work, our service of worship is one where you are called on to participate in a big way.

¹ Rainer, Thom, *I Will*, (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015), 9.

In the medieval church, services were conducted by the priest in a language the people didn't understand. In some churches today, both the music and the preaching are performances on a stage. In our liturgy, all of you are called to involve your head, your hands, and your heart in worship. Our music is *congregational* singing. Many of our prayers are prayed *together*, or offered by representatives of the people. We recite the creeds together, we exemplify our unity together as we pass the peace, and we partake of the Supper together. Even in those parts of the service where the congregation is silent and the minister speaks for God, we respond back to God with our affirmations and amens. Our worship isn't a performance *for* the people, it is the work *of* the people; part of our *priestly sacrifice*.

And as the Church scatters into smaller groups in community, we still carry out our priestly service towards one another. We exhort and encourage one another, we rebuke sin and error, we sing and pray and eat and work together, and all of this is priestly service. Ordained officers play a significant role in this *as examples*, and at times *shepherds* who step in to guard or rescue straying sheep, but in a healthy church, most of the spiritual service is carried out by the universal priesthood, not just by those priests who are called to the special offices.

So when you see someone in need of spiritual instruction or help or care, your first thought should not be, "I'd better find a trained religious professional." You should think "I'm a priest; I can help!" Of course, you should also be taking this responsibility seriously, so that you are prepared to offer true priestly help – you need to know your Bible and you need to be living spiritually yourself, which involves constantly receiving the priestly ministry of other saints who are building you up, as well.

But children, I want you to listen, too, because you are priests, too. You can pray for others, you can help others, you can learn Bible verses and share them with others, and you can sing songs to others, too. I have a very clear memory of watching a young girl in this congregation go to the hospital to visit another member, where she prayed and sang a hymn. By doing that, she was offering priestly service to God by blessing her brothers and sisters in Christ! This isn't just for grownups – children, you are priests, too, and God calls you serve your church family!

And finally, your priestly role in mission: mission is the most scattered aspect of the Church, but even there your priestly calling follows you. You are not just a priest at church; you are a *kingdom* of priests, which means that your priestly work extends as far as the kingdom does! Any and all kingdom work is priestly work!

Luther and the Reformers explained it this way as this as they reformed the doctrine of vocation: the priesthood of all believers doesn't mean that everyone does or ought to work for the Church full-time; it means that all lawful work that Christians do is holy, priestly work. God calls some of His priests to construction, some to pastoral ministry, some to politics, and some to birth and raise children.

This understanding helps to transform what we think of as our ordinary moments into a life that glorifies God. When we understand our priestly calling, we can reject the secular/sacred divide that threatens to disconnect Sunday from the other days of our week. Col. 3:23 says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." Because Jesus has made you a priest, everything you do is priestly work.

Every baptized Christian is entrusted with the office of church member, because the one who loves you and freed you from your sins by his blood has made you a kingdom of priests to His God and Father. So let us offer to God our priestly service,

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*