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The Ecclesiological Implications of the Priesthood of All Believers

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Introduction

The Seventh-day Adventist Church lacks a clear ecclesiology. Much of our early theology was developed around doctrine and defending the foundations of our faith, rather than in establishing an understanding of the nature and purposes of the church. Because of the nature of being a movement, there was an emphasis on functionality rather than intentionality.

Church polity, organization, worship and community life were largely derived and borrowed from other denominations. The Adventist Church grew at such an astonishing rate that we had no time to develop a theology of the church. Now, over 150 years from our origins, the biggest challenges to church unity are not doctrinal but ecclesiological. Should women be ordained? How can the church keep its young adults? Who has authority in church order? What is the role of the Adventist pastor? Unlike the Ford crisis of the late '70s, these questions are not over our fundamental beliefs, but over our practice and contextualization.

It is in light of this ecclesiological dilemma that we return to that primary Protestant doctrine of the Reformation: the priesthood of all believers. In this doctrine are elements that are useful for our development of an Adventist ecclesiology.

In this paper, we will look at two primary biblical passages which undergird the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (one in the Old and one in the New) and discuss how they can inform and develop an Adventist ecclesiology. We will also look at traditional Reformation understandings of this doctrine and critically evaluate what we can learn from its theological

development. Throughout, we will examine the practical implications of the doctrine of the priesthood of believers for God’s end-time eschatological movement.

Covenantal Purpose for the Priestly Nation in the Old Testament

The idea of the priesthood of believers does not suddenly begin in the New Testament, but stretches back to the Old.¹ The most significant exposition of this idea is found in Exodus 19:5-6, as part of the giving of the covenant at Mt. Sinai.

“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.”²

What does it mean to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation”? A group of slaves, formerly subject to the wishes and tyrannical demands of their task masters are now elevated to the status of a kingdom and a nation where they function as priests and are able to access the blessings of God directly. In the ancient world, a priest was one of the most elevated positions in society.³ God has elevated these slaves to being priests!

But why call this new nation, a nation of priests? It is one thing to give priests to a nation, and to have a select group to serve them. But the covenantal God introduces a radically different concept - the entire nation is to serve as priests.

¹ See a discussion of the Old Testament texts in Uche Anizor and Hank Voss, *Representing Christ: A Vision for the Priesthood of All Believers* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 25-41 and in John Brug, “The priesthood of all believers and the ministry” (n.d.) retrieved November 1, 2017, from <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/BrugPriesthood.pdf>.

²Exodus 19:5-6, *English Standard Version (ESV)*, which is the translation used throughout the rest of this paper unless noted otherwise.

³ When God calls His people to be a kingdom of priests, He draws on an existing understanding of what it is that a priest does. The Hebrew word kohen is used for both Israel’s priests as well as those of other nations (e.g. Gen. 41:45; 1 Sam. 5:5; 2 Kings 10:19). Priests were given an honored status because they were representatives and mediators of God/the gods.

There are three things that priests are to do. Priests *teach* others the word that has been revealed to them. The term *priest* chiefly designates one who has to do with the word of God.⁵ If the priest fails to respond to, obey and deliver the words of God, he has failed in His task. In Moses' blessing of the Levites, he pronounces, "They shall teach Jacob your rules and Israel your law" (Deut. 33:10). Priests, therefore, have a teaching function. They share the Word of God with others.

In Exodus 19:6 Israel is also called to be a "holy nation." The Aaronic and Levitical priesthood was often connected with holiness. Holiness sets priests apart from others. "There are only priests if there are also those who are not priests. If everybody is a priest, no one is a priest."⁷ Priests are therefore God's *representatives* to non-priests and must live by His words and demonstrate His character.

Priests also sacrifice on behalf of the people and serve them. Priests are therefore *mediators* with God. "The priest is the mediator of God's promise of providential care."⁹ In his service and round of duties, the priest reminds the people of who God is and how He will care for them. Perhaps this is why one of the functions of a priest was to bless the people. "At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord to stand before the Lord to minister to him and *to bless in his name*, to this day."¹⁰ The priest not only sacrificed for the people and represented them to God, but He also stood for God and blessed the people with *shalom*.

⁵ Gottlob Schrenk, "hiereus," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:260.

⁷ Norman Nagel, "Luther and the Priesthood of All Believers," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (October 1997), 278.

⁹ Amizor and Voss, 36.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 10:8; cf. 21:5

So what does the Old Testament teach us about the role of Israel as a kingdom of priests and how might that apply to Adventist ecclesiology?

We must be faithful to God's word and teach it to others. There is a strong tendency to let culture shape the form and worship of the church. Worship services are driven by contextualization rather than faithfulness. Sermons are replaced with homilies that more closely resemble *Reader's Digest* than they do an exposition of God's word. We have to be reminded that simply pleasing popular tastes and desires led to the golden calf. The priesthood of believers must take seriously the task of being faithful proclaimers of the Divine Word. This means not only teaching that Word, but living it out in our daily lives.

Holiness is part of the covenant of love. As a church in harmony with the priesthood of believers, we must never lose a sense of what it means to be holy. However, there has been a shift away from holiness in recent years because holiness was defined through the lens of legalism. The result was guilt, shame and a loss of assurance. Our churches and institutions are afraid to try to promote holiness because of the negative stigma that has been created. So, how can we be a "holy nation" today?

We must redefine holiness in relational rather than legal terms. When we show total and loving commitment to God and sacrificial concern and protection of our neighbor, we are living out holiness. This is made clear from the Holiness Code of Leviticus 19. Holiness is Love.

What good is it to have a group that agrees with the 28 Fundamental Beliefs, but gossips about each other and plays political games to gain board control and power? What does it say about our holiness when young people see it as fake and hypocritical? What does it say about our pastors when they spend more time with CNN or Fox News than they do in the presence of God? What does it say about our church when we spend more time arguing over ordination than we

spend reflecting on what God requires of us as believers? Let us return to being a holy nation – one who loves God and deeply cares for our neighbor!

The fact that there is little distinction between God's people and the world is a sad reflection of how we have trampled holiness in the dust. In the past people tried, like the Pharisees, to make holiness an external code. However, God requires in his new covenant, a holiness of the heart. This holiness turns us from selfish people into sacrificial people.

We are called to sacrificially serve and bless others. As God's people are blessed, they in turn become a blessing to those around them. Unfortunately, like ancient Israel, we often forget our priestly function and begin to believe that our task is done when we have received God's blessing for ourselves. But, a true priest does not go the temple to seek his own blessing. No, he goes to minister and mediate on behalf of others. So, the church does not exist for itself, but for the sake of those outside the church.

If the church takes its missional task seriously, it will stop its internal fighting over worship, money, church buildings and church order. These things are often driven by selfish desires and perspectives (James 4:1-4). Instead, the church must realize that it exists to be a blessing in the world. The question we should be asking is, "If your church disappeared from your community tomorrow, would anybody notice?" Because we have failed to ask this question, we have failed to live out our calling as a kingdom of priests.

Our ecclesiology then must be faithful to the Word of God, must live out that Word in relational holiness and must recognize the role of the church to mediate God's blessings to the world. It will not do this as a form of works, but in response to God's gracious salvation and calling.

Let us now turn our attention to the New Testament. For this section, we will also interact with Reformation views, especially those of Martin Luther, since his understanding of the New Testament vision of the priesthood has shaped much of theological thinking on this topic.

The Priesthood of Believers in the New Testament

When Martin Luther stumbled across the words of 1 Peter 2:9 (a quotation based on the Exodus 19:6 text that we have already examined), he was taken aback by the implications.

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Nowhere in the New Testament Church did he find the priesthood applied to individuals, except when it applied to Christ. Instead, the priesthood was applied to the corporate body. As baptized believers, they were invited into the “royal priesthood.” The implications of this idea were profound for Luther. If all the members were priests, then papal priests had no authority.

At that time, the papal priests exercised their power to both limit the believer’s direct access to God as well as to demand allegiance to their own authority, rather than the authority of Christ and His word. Since papal priests were seen as the only ones who could approach God and administer the sacraments, they stood in the way of the believer’s access to God and His gifts.

Luther’s solution to this abuse of power was to strike at the core of the doctrine of the priesthood. Christ had not called papal dignitaries to the priesthood. All baptized believers are ordained to priesthood! All have direct access to God and all are called to administer God’s gifts to others.

In Luther’s view, when Christ came, the temporal priesthood and kingdom of the Old Testament was abolished and was replaced with a spiritual kingdom and priesthood. He saw in the book of Hebrews the transition of the earthly priesthood to the heavenly Melchizedek

priesthood of Christ, the true High Priest (Heb. 7:12-24; 9:1-3) who now became the head of the real, antitypical, spiritual ‘priesthood’ of the church.

Luther had a remarkable concern for the ordinary, common Christian. He boldly stated, “If you want to look at the Christians, you must not see any difference and must not say: That is a man or a woman, a servant or a master, old or young, as Paul says in Gal. 3:28. It is all one thing and purely spiritual people. Therefore they are altogether priests.”¹¹

Luther saw this priesthood understanding as radically redeeming secular vocation and elevating it to the same level as the ministerial calling. “All believers have equally received the treasures which God has given; no vocation is more sacred than any other. No vocation is better than another. God has called all believers, without exception, to be His royal priests--from the dockworker to the doctor, from the messenger to the manager, from the educator to the executive. No legitimate vocation is too low to be the vehicle through which God will do His work.”¹²

These words sound very similar to the words of Ellen White. “Upon . . . the missionary nurse, the Christian physician, the individual Christian, whether he be merchant or farmer, professional man or mechanic—the responsibility rests upon all. It is our work to reveal to men the gospel of their salvation. Every enterprise in which we engage should be a means to this end.”¹³

This radical concept was what led many to claim that Luther had completely and utterly abolished any distinction between the clergy and the laity. The radical uplifting of the lay believer was an iconoclastic demolition of the traditional Catholic priest. But this did not mean

¹¹ St. Louis, Vol. IX, 1014 f.

¹² Cyril Eastwood, *The Priesthood of All Believers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1962), 12.

¹³ Ellen. G. White, Manuscript 151, 1897.

that Luther was against clergy as church leaders. It simply indicated that his views shifted over time as he tried to define the role of pastors in a new dispensation.¹⁴

The implication of this doctrine for the eschatological priesthood is that it is fundamentally lay-driven, rather than being pastor-driven. Ellen White writes that “ministers should not do the work which belongs to the church, thus wearying themselves, and preventing others from performing their duty. They should teach the members how to labor in the church and in the community.”¹⁵ She also comments that, “in laboring where there are already some in the faith, the minister should at first seek not so much to convert unbelievers, as to train the church members for acceptable co-operation.”¹⁶

These thoughts have been re-echoed in recent years by both Rex Edwards¹⁷ and Russell Burrill who have both argued that we must put every member to work as a minister. The role of pastors is simply to train and equip church members to do ministry.¹⁸

Why has the lay-driven model failed to gain traction in the Adventist Church, especially in North America? Firstly, our theology has been turned into a program rather than an integral part of our ministry. We teach *Total Member Involvement*, but it is often taught as a program on a Sabbath afternoon rather than as a fundamental shift in our theology. Where this kind of active lay ministry exists, it often exists because pastors are not available, and not because the church has actively promoted the value of lay members in ministry.

¹⁴ Brian Gerrish argues that Luther’s concept of the priesthood of all believers must be understood against the background of three contextual forces. Firstly, Luther’s polemic against Rome and its abuses; then the practical need for evangelical pastors in the new congregations (even though they might not be ordained by a bishop); and lastly, the threat of radical reformers and those who were claiming the office of pastor but who were not sanctioned by any church. “Priesthood and Ministry in the Theology of Luther,” *Church History*, Vol. 34, no. 4 (December 1965), 404-422.

¹⁵ Ellen White, *Historical sketches*. (Basel, Switzerland: Imprimerie Polyglotte, 1886), 291.

¹⁶ Ellen White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 1915), 196.

¹⁷ Rex Edwards, *Every Believer a Minister* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1995), 13.

¹⁸ Russell Burrill, *Revolution in the Church* (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Research, 1993), 30.

Secondly, this approach has failed because of the professionalization of ministry, especially in urban contexts in the West. Lay members cannot easily serve as church leaders without having a paid pastor to supervise them. If a sermon needs to be preached, a pastor should do it. If a person in hospital needs to be visited, it is not good enough for the elders to do it, the pastor must also be there. If counseling is needed, you had better call the pastor, because he is trained to do that kind of work. It is intimidating for lay members to do ministry when they have a trained professional in their midst. To them, it feels like being asked to do a surgery when you have not trained as a doctor. Until we are willing to treat lay people as valuable and royal priests, even though they may not be professionals, the priesthood of all believers' doctrine will not be sufficiently transformative.

Thirdly, these ideas have not gained traction because the church still practices exclusivism. Our conferences and sessions are still largely controlled by professional pastors. When votes are made at any session, they are made by a majority of pastors and not of lay people. Our resources (especially tithe) are directed toward settled pastors who belong to an exclusive club who have gained their status by education and erudition. We have particularly devalued women and excluded them in general from fulltime gospel ministry as well as largely under-represented them in decision-making bodies. Until we can see the eschatological priesthood as empowering both men and women in ministry and elevating the vocation of ordinary believers, we will fail to accomplish the eschatological vision to which God has called us. A vision that sees both men and women as servants of the Living God who will proclaim His Name to the ends of the earth (Acts 2:18).

Eschatological Priests in the Antitypical Day of Atonement

We now turn our attention to the Day of Atonement, which captures the incarnational heart of the priest. Greggs says, “In offering a sacrifice on the day of atonement, the priest not only risks his own life for the sake of the people in coming into the very presence of God, but actually bears the iniquity of the people on his own forehead (Ex. 28:38; Lev. 10:17; Num. 18:1 and 23).”¹⁹

In the antitypical Day of Atonement, what are God’s priests doing? We have often seen our role as interceding for *ourselves* during a time of Jacob’s trouble. But what if God was asking us to intercede on behalf of the world? The call to holiness on the Day of Atonement is the same call that comes to the eschatological priesthood (see 1 Peter 1:14-16). The antitypical Day of Atonement sees the eschatological priesthood following their High Priest into the Most Holy Place and pleading with the Father for the people.

After all, priests are servants. This, at least, is how Christ himself defined the priesthood that He exemplified in His own character. Listen to the words of Jesus in Mark 10:42-45:

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant (or slave) and whoever would be first among you must be slave (or servant) of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus sees a place for Christian leadership, but it is that of a servant and even a slave, rather than a position of power. Commenting on this text, Darius Jankiewicz says, “Thus, the Christian rite of ordination, properly understood, is *ordination to slavery*.”²⁰ Several New

¹⁹ Tom Greggs, “The Priesthood of No Believer: On the Priesthood of Christ and His Church,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Vol. 17 No. 4 (October 2015), 380.

²⁰ Darius Jankiewicz, “Authority of the Christian Leader,” *Women and Ordination: Biblical and Historical Studies* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2015), 67.

Testament passages show that the apostles and leaders of the Christian church considered themselves slaves for the sake of Christ. Paul, James and Peter all introduce themselves as slaves (Romans 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1).²¹

This concept of being a humble servant is further extended to all leaders. Peter tells them to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.... Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’”²² Pastors and leaders are seen as servants and not as kings and priests.

The ecclesiology of the last day priesthood will therefore be incarnational and service-based because it has learned to love with the High Priest’s heart.

Implications of New Testament Idea for Adventist Ecclesiology

How does this concept of the priesthood of all believers influence Seventh-day Adventist ecclesiology? Firstly, we must question if our ecclesiology has slowly drifted toward episcopal ideas of the priesthood rather than the biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers. Why has ordination to gospel ministry become so important to the church that it is the defining issue of our current theological debates and threatens the unity of the church?

When ordination is seen not as an ordination to service, but as an ordination to ecclesiastical power and leadership in the church, we have lost sight of the priesthood of all believers. The energies of the church have been spent on understanding who has leadership, rather than on equipping all members with an understanding of their role as kingly priests. When

²¹ Ibid. See further explanation of this concept in Jankiewicz’ article.

²² 1 Peter 5:2-5

the major discussions of the church revolve around power, authority and order, we seem closer to anti-Reformation rhetoric than to empowering the priesthood of believers.

Of course, there is obviously a need for church order. Just as Luther had to adapt to the changing political climate of the growing Reformation church, we must deal with these forces too. But the discussion must not focus so much on church polity that it forgets our essential understanding of the identity and mission of God's people. We are all called to the royal priesthood of God! Failure to follow this principle will lead us back into episcopalian theology and the death of the church's mission.

Instead, we must see the church as a community of God on a mission to faithfully serve (and save) the world. It must be a holy movement, set apart by God for His sacred purposes, "a peculiar people" that reflect God's mission and God's heart.

Conclusion - The Eschatological Priesthood

At the end of time, God calls His people to be a priesthood under their High Priest Christ during the antitypical Day of Atonement. Is this not the moment for us to understand the implications of that idea? We must take up our radical teaching mission, our holiness mission, our mediation mission and our saving mission. We must see that all believers are called to serve in ministry, without regard to their education or their status. We are all holy priests, called to serve together the mission of God.

After all, one day we will finally achieve God's original goal when it is declared of the Priestly Lamb of God,

Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth." (Revelation 5:9-10).

