

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE REFORMATION IN DOCTRINE. THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE BELIEVER.

By the REV. A. W. PARSONS, L.Th.

Vicar of St. John's, Boscombe.

MAY I begin this paper by quoting the opening words of a little booklet (price 2d.) on *The Priesthood of the Laity*, which I wrote for the N.C.L. ?

Recent events in the world have shown that a cleavage not contemplated in primitive times has developed between the clergy and laity in many countries or rather, between Church and State, which may prove disastrous to both.

In his essay on Milton, Macaulay writes of the Puritans : " On the rich and the eloquent, on nobles and priests, they looked down with contempt, for they esteemed themselves rich in a more precious treasure, and eloquent in a more sublime language, nobles by the right of an earlier creation, and priests by the imposition of a mightier hand." Dr. Temple, Archbishop of York, in *Christianity and the State*, says, " The humblest child of God has a rank above that of earthly emperors." Every Christian layman is in fact a priest. It is possible that in the due recognition of the priesthood of the laity we may find a great principle which shall be a buttress against the claim of the " Totalitarian " State to dominate the individual in the interests of the State.

I. The Reformation.

It was the Papal claim to universal supremacy, with all the abuses it involved, which made the Reformation necessary. In the Middle Ages there had grown up a conception of the Church which was fundamentally unchristian. St. Augustine, in his unfinished masterpiece, *De Civitate Dei*, with a devout and glowing imagination had contrasted the *Civitas Terrena*, or the secular state, founded on conquest and maintained by fraud and violence with the Kingdom of God which he identified with the visible Church. This conception filled the imagination of all Christians. The Roman Empire was breaking up and men began to conceive the idea of a force making for righteousness, which should be greater than local kings or princes and should secure just and decent government in Europe through its supervising moral control in every realm. The mischievous activity of Roman apologists and canonists transformed St. Augustine's vision of the Celestial City into that Terrestrial City which he reprobated ; and under strong and masterful Popes the ideal Kingdom of God became a vulgar, earthly monarchy, bolstered up by false decretals and extravagant Papal claims. The visible ecclesiastical empire was ruled by the Popes with all those accompaniments of conquest, fraud and violence,

which the great Theologian of the West had so strongly denounced. The mediæval doctrine of the Church then found its basis in the Canon Law and the Forged Decretals. Its background was the conception of the Church as a great temporal Empire. Its sanction was found in the popular superstitions of the time. For example, it was almost universally believed in mediæval times that the mediation of a priest was necessary to salvation, and that the priesthood was an integral part of this monarchy and did not exist outside the boundaries of the formal ministry. Harnack (*History of Dogma* VI., 132n., Eng. Trans.) says: "No good Catholic Christian doubted that in spiritual things the clergy were the Divinely appointed superiors of the laity; that this power proceeded from the right of the priests to celebrate the sacraments; that the Pope was the real possessor of this power and was far superior to all secular authority." This conception of the Church and the ministry found support in the writings of the theologian, Thomas Aquinas (1226-1274), who set himself to prove that submission to the Pope was necessary for every human creature. The Popes from Innocent IV (1243) to Alexander VI (Borgia), in 1493, claimed this universal supremacy in a series of Bulls. The power they claimed was a twofold supremacy in things temporal and spiritual. The temporal supremacy involved in its widest extent the claim to depose kings, to free their subjects from their allegiance and to give their territories to others. Just before the Reformation the King of Bohemia insisted that the Pope should keep the bargain made with his Hussite subjects at the Council of Basel. He was declared to be deposed as a heretic by Pope Paul II in 1465, his kingdom was offered to the King of Hungary, and a dreadful war resulted. Later still, in 1511, Pope Julius II excommunicated the king of Navarre and empowered any neighbouring king to seize his dominions—an offer eagerly accepted by Ferdinand of Aragon. This excommunication was used by the Ambassador of Philip II to threaten Queen Elizabeth in 1559, as we learn from our own State papers.

The spiritual supremacy was, and is, as thoroughly worldly and political as the temporal. It was gradually interpreted to mean that the Bishop of Rome was the one or universal bishop and that all other bishops were simply his delegates. Lindsay (*History of the Reformation*), to whom I am here greatly indebted, points out that according to mediæval ideas, men were spiritual if they were clergy or monks, and this meant that any such ecclesiastic was entirely exempt from secular control. Fields and fences, drains and dwellings, barns and byres were spiritual things if they were Church property. Thus a so-called spiritual kingdom lay scattered over Europe in Diocesan lands, Convent estates, and Parish glebes, which was interwoven in the web of the ordinary kingdoms and principalities of Europe. The papal claim to mis-called spiritual supremacy involved countless interference with temporal sovereigns and when the Reformation came it was welcomed in many countries because of the papal domination of all life.

In the realm of patronage temporal rulers sought to protect themselves by statutes of *Praemunire* or they made bargains with the popes which took the form of *Concordats* (1438 and 1448).

But the Church, in the language of the Italians, was *Il Bodega Papa*: "the Pope's Shop," and when he claimed, in spite of Statutes and Concordats, to deal with its property, the rulers had to give way. Pope John XXII (1316-1334) began that series of papal financial exactions which helped to bring about the Reformation. He was the first pope to make the dispensation of grace a source of systematic revenue and under his successors, annates, procurations, fees, incomes of vacant benefices, subsidies and dispensations became a regular and increasing source of income. The day at length came when Martin Luther in his address: "*To the Nobility of the German Nation respecting the Reformation of the Christian Estate*," could fitly describe the Papal Court as a place "where vows were annulled, where the monk gets leave to quit his Order, where priests can enter the married life for money, where bastards can become legitimate and dishonour and shame may arrive at high honours; all evil repute and disgrace is knighted and ennobled."

2. Rise of Nationalism.

Before the Reformation, as in many countries to-day, men were told that Nationalities had no place within the Catholic Church. Rome was the common fatherland and the Pope was really the King of the World. It is not always realized that a great wave of Nationalism was rising prior to the Reformation. Our own country was the first to become a compact nationality. In France the Hundred Years' War with England created a sense of nationality and resulted in power being concentrated in the royal hands of Charles VII and Louis XI. In Spain, the severities of the Inquisition led to revolutions and lawlessness until Charles V became the despotic dictator. But his troubles in Spain helped to prevent him from putting into execution in Germany, as he desired to do, the ban issued at Worms against Luther. Germany and Italy, in the beginning of the sixteenth century had made almost no progress in becoming united and compact nations. Machiavelli says that the Italians owed it to Rome that they were divided into factions.

3. The Renaissance.

Meanwhile, in the world the movement known as the Renaissance was taking place. It was a movement of discovery and emancipation; of the bursting of barriers primarily intellectual. "It was the blossoming and justifying of the European intellectual life; but perhaps it ought to be added that it contained a new conception of the universe in which religion consisted less in a feeling of dependence on God and more on a faith in the possibilities lying in mankind" (Lindsay: *The History of the Reformation*, Vol. I, p. 45). But as Sir Charles Oman said in a paper on "The Necessity for the Reformation," read in the Oxford Town Hall, on November 27th, 1933, "There was no salvation for the Christian soul in the Renaissance. It was a thing of beauty, an intellectual awakening, but it was not a moral movement. . . . What was wanted and what came, was a revolt against spiritual wickedness in high places, combined with a revolt against stupid traditionalism and the

worship of authority founded on ignorance." . . . "I am bound to confess," he continued, "that I see nothing convincing in the theory that the abominable condition of Christendom in 1500 could have been cured by good scholarship any more than it could be cured by good art. People like the 'Oxford Reformers,' or Erasmus, had their share in preparing the way for the spiritual revolt, but something much more explosive was needed to break down the whole system." That was supplied when Luther published, in October 1520, "A very small book so far as the paper is concerned" (as he said), but one "containing the whole sum of the Christian Life." It was called: *The Liberty of a Christian Man*, and it was a brief and direct statement of the priesthood of all believers which is a consequence of the fact of justification by faith alone. He first proves that every spiritual possession which a man has or can have must come from his faith. It is the possession of faith which gives liberty to a Christian man. "God is for him. Who can be against him?" He goes on to say: "Here you will ask, 'If all who are in the Church are priests, by what character are those whom we now call priests to be distinguished from the laity?' I reply, by the use of those words, priests, clergy, spiritual person, ecclesiastic, an injustice has been done, since they have been transferred from the remaining body of Christians to those few who are now, by a hurtful custom called ecclesiastics. For the Holy Scripture makes no distinction between them, except that those who are now boastfully called Popes, Bishops, and Lords, it calls ministers, servants and stewards, who are to serve the rest in the ministry of the Word, for teaching the faith of Christ and the liberty of believers. For though it is true that we are all equally priests, yet cannot we, nor ought we, if we could, all to minister and teach publicly."

4. The Priesthood of all Believers.

"It was this principle of the Priesthood of all Believers," says Lindsay (*The Reformation*, Vol. I, p. 444), "which delivered men from the vague fear of the clergy and which was a spur to incite them to undertake the reformation of the Church which was so much needed. It is the one great religious principle which lies at the basis of the whole Reformation movement. It was the rock on which all attempts at reunion with an unreformed Christendom were wrecked. It is the one outstanding difference between the followers of the reformed and the mediaeval religion." Either all believers are priests or none. A special caste of priests with exclusive prerogatives as regards communicating or withholding the free grace of God was irreconcilable with the Lutheran experience of faith and its benefits. As the late Dr. Diggle, Bishop of Carlisle, wrote: "No function is conferred on the priest to the abasement of the layman." Luther allowed distinction of function in the Christian ministry, but the function was representative and not exclusive. He therefore declared that at the Holy Communion, "Our priest or minister stands before the altar, having been publicly called to his priestly function; he repeats publicly and distinctly Christ's words of the institution; he takes the Bread and the

Wine, and distributes it according to Christ's words and we all kneel beside him and around him, men and women, young and old, master and servant, mistress and maid, all holy priests together, sanctified by the blood of Christ. We are there in our priestly dignity. . . . We do not let the priest proclaim for himself the ordinance of Christ : but he is the mouthpiece of us all, and we all say it with him in our hearts with true faith in the Lamb of God Who feeds us with His Body and Blood." This corporate character of the priestly function is brought out in the Coptic Liturgy, "Where the people generally by their responses are clearly shown to take a part and share in the consecration prayer," as the present Bishop of Gloucester indicated in the Oxford discussion on "Priesthood and Sacrifice." Karl von Hase (*Handbook to the Controversy with Rome*, p. 155), points out that before the Reformation it was taught that by virtue of the grace derived from office the most profligate priest possessed a higher dignity than the most pious layman. "The Lord God," they said, "required six days to create the world ; the priest creates the God-Man in a moment." The Council of Trent, therefore, based the priesthood upon the offering of sacrifice in the Mass. But the Catholic theory, as he goes on to state, is not carried out with logical completeness. Among so-called sacraments, marriage, according to old traditional opinion, is not completed by the action of the priest. Other sacraments too, can, in case of necessity, be administered by laymen. "Where the clergy are not at hand," says Tertullian (Exhort, Cast 7) : "Thou mayest thyself make the offering and baptize, and art thine own priest." Frumentius, the Apostle and Bishop of Ethiopia, while yet a layman founded the Church in Abyssinia and performed the sacred liturgical service. St. Augustine relates how, in a shipwreck, a layman and a catechumen hung upon a board, the layman baptized the catechumen, the newly baptized pronounced the absolution over the former, and thus they both met their drowning with good courage. Baptism by laymen in cases of necessity has always been considered valid. In the Middle Ages it happened not infrequently that knights in peril of death, where no priest was available, heard each other's confessions. Dr. Hatch in the "Organization of the Early Churches" (Lect. V), has shown that preaching, the exercise of discipline, the administration of baptism, and the Eucharist were all practised by laymen in the first two centuries.

In view of the claims made to-day for the Episcopate it is worthy of note that all Church members are called upon, in accordance with the words of our Lord in Matthew vii. 15, to form an opinion on doctrinal questions and to judge whether what they are taught is true or false. The Bereans are commended for testing the truth of St. Paul's own teaching. The Galatians are exhorted "to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free and not to be entangled again with the yoke of bondage," which erring teachers would lay upon them. The Thessalonians were to "prove all things, hold fast that which is good." And St. John addresses all Christians : "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they be of God." Dr. Garvie in the *Christian Preacher*, p. 317, speaking of the Ministry of the Word says : "The preacher not only speaks to the people, but

for the people ; the sermon is no less a collective act through the representative of the community than are the prayer and the praise."

The Priesthood of the Believer is Taught in Holy Scripture.

The earliest mention of it occurs in Exodus xix. 5, where on the eve of the giving of the Law we read : " Now therefore if ye will obey My voice indeed and keep My covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me from among all peoples : for all the earth is Mine and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." The title " kingdom of priests " is here given to Israel, but St. Peter applies the term to all Christians as being the ideal Israel of God in 1 Peter ii. 5-9. " Ye are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession." The author of the Book of Revelation also applies these words to all believers. Rev. i. 6 : " He made us to be a kingdom, priests unto God and His Father." Rev. xx. 6 : " They shall be priests of God and of Christ." On this passage St. Augustine says : " This is not at all said *solely* concerning bishops and presbyters who are now appropriately called priests in the Church." Irenaeus (A.D. 167) declares : " All righteous men hold the priestly order " (Adv Haer, lib. IV c. XX, p. 245), and Tertullian (A.D. 192) says : " Are not also our laymen priests ? It is written : " He has made us a kingdom and priests to God " (De Exhort. Cast. c. VII, p. 566).

In the New Testament the word used for the office of a minister is *presbuteros* from which sacrificial associations are entirely absent and never *hieros* from which such associations are inseparable. The apostles never claimed to be, or to appoint, priestly officers, and they never pretended to link on to the new Church any fragments of an O.T. sacrificial system that was in their opinion outworn and spent.

Dr. Elliott Binns (*The Evangelical Movement*, p. 118) says : " It is indeed remarkable that no trace of sacerdotal language is found in the N.T., a book coming from a community like that of the Apostolic Church, a Community, be it remembered, which was steeped in the ideas of the O.T., and made up for the most part of Jews, of people accustomed to a religion in which sacrifices and sacrificial ideas were very prominent."

The minister was regarded as a priest in no other sense than was every disciple. Indeed in the singular number the word " priest " is found only of Christ, and His Priesthood is said, in Heb. vii. 7, 24, to be undelegated or intransmissible, a priesthood not passing from one to another. When it is used of the Church it is always in the plural " priests " (Rev. i. 6), or collectively " priesthood " (1 Peter ii. 5). As the late Dr. Griffith Thomas wrote (*Principles of Theology*, p. 316) : " The truth is that Christianity *is*, not *has*, a priesthood." Bishop Westcott is reported to have observed in some of his lectures at Cambridge that the avoidance in the N.T. of this familiar term " priest " was the nearest approach he knew to verbal inspiration.

To all believers alike then the priestly privilege of access to God belongs (Rom. v. 2 ; Eph. ii. 18 ; Heb. iv. 16 ; x. 18 ; 1 Peter iii. 18). All alike are called to offer spiritual sacrifices of praise and prayer (Heb. xiii. 15) ; of body and soul (Rom. xii. 1 ; Heb. xiii. 18) with

such actual gifts in charity and helpfulness as are prompted by love to God (Heb. xiii. 16 ; 2 Cor. ix. 7 ; Phil. iv. 18). Nothing of this kind is an offering for sin, the virtue of that made by Christ being inexhaustible. The individual believer gives an account of himself to God and no artificial system of mediation prevents him from standing in personal and incommunicable responsibility before God.

This is the teaching of our own Church. She declares in her homilies that : " We need no sacrificing priest." The Reformers took away from the Ordination Service that portion where the minister was directed to offer sacrifices and that portion of the Communion Service in which the Priest pretended to offer Christ's Body. Throughout the Prayer Book the term priest is interchangeable with minister. In the Latin of Article XXXI, when referring to the Roman Priest she uses the term *Sacerdos*, that is, a sacrificing priest. In Article XXXII referring to those ordained in the Reformed Church she uses the term *Presbyteris*. We may even pause to note the significance of the change of usage in the versicle from Psalm cxxxii. 16 from : " Let Thy priests be clothed with righteousness," to " Endue Thy ministers with righteousness." Dr. Ince, a former Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, points out that the power given in the Roman Church to her priests : " to offer sacrifice," " is not one of the powers . . . committed to the Anglican priest." He goes on to remark that our Reformers had been accustomed to the phraseology of the Sarum Ordinal, and that, " It cannot have been without significance that no counterpart to these expressions is found in the Reformed Ordinal. Our Reformers must have held the view which Hooker unhesitatingly asserted that sacrifice is now no part of the Christian ministry " (Ince : *The Scriptural and Anglican View of the Functions of the Christian Ministry*, pp. 12-13).

The late Dr. S. K. Knight, Bishop of Jarrow, in the Cambridge Pastoral Theology Lectures (1925-26) published in 1933, by the Cambridge University Press under the title *Fulfilling the Ministry*, p. 58, says : " All the baptized share this priesthood being appointed to offer sacrifice to God, to deliver others from sin, to pray for them and bless them. The English Church gives plain proof of this conception . . . in its public worship and the Prayer Book is designed to help them to take their part in it with the spirit and with the understanding. The prayers are in the Mother tongue, the order is so simple that all may share it. The directions to ensure congregational worship make it plain that all are called to exercise their priesthood. The arrangements of our Church also emphasize this fact. There is no part of the Church shut in from the congregation. All the communicants come to the altar rails to receive the Sacrament into their hands as consecrated priests of God." There is an interesting note appended. " The rubrical direction : ' into their hands ' has a special significance which has later been emphasized by the R.V., for the Hebrew phrase for consecrating a priest is ' to fill the hands,' that is to say, the holy things which no layman might touch were solemnly given to him. And so with us, all baptized and confirmed members of the Church are priests, for all have their hands filled " (see Ex. xxviii. 41 ; xxix. 24, 33).

“The Church of England,” so writes the historian, Mr. C. R. L. Fletcher, “is a layman’s Church.” By that he means that the relations of the Church of England to the Church of Rome and her forms of public worship are determined by Acts of Parliament and not by the decisions of any Pope or of any General Council or of the Convocations. The Church of England is a Layman’s Church as in the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity the laity have laid down the conditions on which its endowments and privileges are enjoyed. It has been stated, however, that the new powers exercised in our Church by the National Assembly have all resulted in the exaltation of the power of the bishops and to a lesser extent the clergy, while those of the laity have been gradually curtailed. The Report of the Lambeth Conference in July 1908, declared : “The Church needs to realize in new ways the inherent priesthood of the Christian people.” The contrary seems to have happened. History has shown us that an autocratic hierarchy has led into terrible tyranny over the Body of Christ. The corrective to such autocracy is the great truth of the privilege enjoyed by all believers as belonging to a Spirit-inspired body, personally taught by the same Spirit and possessing spiritual judgment as well as free access to God.

I have avoided the line of argument which I pursued in the little booklet to which I referred in my opening paragraph, but I would like to close by quoting from it. “I do not think that the modern habit of shutting out the laity from the discussion of religious matters and doctrine is good. It was a weakness in our Church at the time of the Prayer Book Controversy that sacred Synods of Clergy only, discussed the matter behind locked doors, the Press and all lay people being carefully excluded. In our English Courts of Justice twelve good men and true are still trusted to give an unbiased opinion on matters of fact, although they have never been trained as lawyers.”

In *The Church of Christ* the Rev. E. A. Litton says : “The restoration, in theory at least, of the laity to their rights was an immediate result of the Reformation. By reasserting the universal priesthood of Christians and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit not in a priestly caste, but in the whole body, Luther and his contemporaries shook the edifice of sacerdotal usurpation to its base. Justification by faith put an end to the Confessional with its power of remitting and retaining sins. The Church ceased to be a synonym for the Clergy, and an enquiring age examined the claim of the latter to spiritual illumination. The change was life from the dead.”

Are the laity going to use or to lose their sacred inheritance as priests unto God in the Church of England ?