

Thursday Theology: Our Priestly Mission

Co-missioners,

Last week Chris Neumann told us how he serves as an agent of Easter mission in his role as a basketball coach. Today our mission essayist, Richard Gahl, delivers the gist of a recent effort by an official church commission to endorse and underscore the dignity of what Chris and so many like him are doing every day, year in and year out. This matter gets taken up too in [Upside Down Spirituality](#), a new book by [Chad Bird](#); see Chapter 5, “My Altar Has a Diesel Engine,” p. 103ff. We mention this because Dr. Bird will be one of the featured speakers at our conference next January, and we’d hate for you to miss him. You’ll see why if you follow through on this tip. Meanwhile, roll up your sleeves and let Dick reacquaint you with the way theologians talk when they fall to discussing such things with each other. In play here is some old language that merits dusting off, as we trust you’ll see.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossing Community

Our Priestly Mission: Insights from a Recent LCMS Report

By Richard Gahl



In September 2018 the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod published a long-awaited study, “The Royal Priesthood, Identity and Mission.” This 39 page “Report” was followed by a 15 page “Discussion Guide and Bible Study.” Both of these documents can be accessed at lcms.org/ctcr. The subtitle “Identity and Mission” makes this study worthy of note in a Thursday Theology series on mission. In the summary below, all page numbers refer to the “Report,” not the “Discussion Guide.”

1. The cover page highlights 1 Peter 2:5 with a sketch of an old stone wall with a cross in the center: “You yourselves like living stones are being built up into a spiritual house, but be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (ESV)
2. The introduction notes the “complimentary nature of the royal priesthood with the Office of Public Ministry” quoting the charge of the authorizing national convention

“since ministers [are] chosen from among us” to act “in our name” (p. 2).

3. Exodus 19:4-6 is a foundational text especially in v. 6: “You shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” “The royal priesthood has its explicit beginning with the people of God in the Old Testament before there were any of the Levitical priests we tend to associate with the Old Testament priesthood” (p. 4). The reader of Exodus will note that priestly garments are first described in chapter 28, nine chapters after the reference above.
4. “The doctrine of royal priesthood and the priestly vocation of ‘ordinary Christians’ arises from Reformation theology with such force that some may think these ideas began with Martin Luther... [However] the Reformation recognized that in both the Old and New Testaments ‘priest’ really applied to all who are made new by the promises of God in the Messiah promised in the Messiah who has come” (p. 3).
5. Isaiah 61:5-6 is also cited in support of a royal priesthood: “You shall be called priests of the Lord; they shall speak of you as ministers of our God” (p. 6).
6. “As priesthood unfolds in the Old Testament, we see that it is a work of mediation: offering gifts and sacrifices for sin, offering supplications and prayer, and proclaiming God’s blessings” (p. 4).
7. “The people of Israel were called to be His royal priests entirely because of God’s gracious character, not on account of their virtue or merit” (p. 9).
8. “The failure of many in Israel to see and embrace the Messiah was tied to their misunderstanding of their own

election.... They deluded themselves into thinking that they were the end of what God was about instead of a tool through which he worked for all the world” (p. 11).

Comment: This end/tool analogy is a significant insight into the continuing misunderstanding of the purpose of the church in a significant segment of our own 21st century church. When it is stated that this or that congregation must first take better care of its members before anything else, the church has become an end. It exists for itself, period. The church that understands itself to be God’s tool is continually asking what we might do to serve others.



9. “In Christ this new priesthood and heavenly calling is not focused on Israel or its sacrifices, but on proclaiming the Gospel of Christ’s sacrifice for all people” (p. 10).

10. "There is no reference throughout the New Testament to any priestly office other than the royal priesthood of the baptized. To be sure in the New Testament, individuals are still called and authorized for public ministry on behalf of the royal priesthood, but 'priest' is never included in the various titles applied to the church's public ministers (p. 15). *Caveat*: The Report assumes that second and third century offices are in existence in the New Testament. It does not provide proof for that assumption in the document.

11. "God makes us priests in Baptism. Whether infant or adult, it is all the same, and all are priests. There is a forward-looking, future-oriented thrust in Christ's work of Baptism" (p. 14).

12. "The priests of 1 Peter 2:9 serve by proclaiming the Gospel. Proclamation—to make known the marvelous works and gracious words of God—is the mission of the Church, the mission of all priests, of all believers (p. 18).

13. "The Church exists only when there is mission, and the Church expands only when there is mission... Mission is not extracurricular. It is basic and essential to the life of the Church, and all believers are inextricably bound to this mission" (p. 20).

14. The third section of this document traces priesthood in the early and medieval church. It identifies Cyprian, AD 200-258, as the church father who opened the door to the diminishment of the royal priesthood. "He conceived that the bishops were a special priesthood and had a special sacrifice to offer." This new direction "undermined the place of the royal priesthood in the life of the church... The accumulated effect favored those in the ordained ministry" (pp. 24, 28).

This CTCR report comes down squarely on the complementary nature

of the priesthood of the baptized and the Office of Public Ministry. This complementary nature needs continual reinforcement against the resurgence, in every age, of Cyprian's point of view. What is new in this report is the emphasis on mission for the whole people of God. The subtitle, "Identity and Mission," marks an important way forward.

In passing, a curious note: when checking the Report's key Biblical references in the original Greek and Hebrew, I discovered that the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—inserts a repetition of Ex. 19:5-6 at Ex. 23:22. This repetition does not appear in the Hebrew text, or in English translations based on the Hebrew. The point here is simply that the idea of God's people as a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation" gets an extra boost in one of the key textual traditions of the Old Testament and the one that the author of 1 Peter is almost certain to have relied on.

Finally, two of the texts referenced in "Royal Priesthood" occur in early chapters of Revelation, at 1:5-6 and 5:9-10. Both state that God "has made us to be a kingdom, priests to serve Him." A significant theme in the Gospels is the "kingdom of God." It would see that a discussion of the kingdom of God would strengthen the understanding of the "kingdom of priests' in God's mission.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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