

# Priesthood of all believers theology religion essay



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Luthers greatest contribution to Protestant ecclesiology was his doctrine of priesthood of all believers. It was a central teaching of Luther in the formation of Christian communities. Eric W. Gritsch has claimed, “ Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, developed particularly in his treatises of 1520, is one of the most revolutionary doctrines in the history of Christianity.”[1]It is the clear biblical idea that we could see from the Genesis to Revelation. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers opposes the unbiblical doctrine of sacerdotalism[2]and the existence of a Brahman-like[3]priestly class within the church. When Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the door of Wittenberg Castle Church on October 31, 1517, he was declaring war against the idea that salvation comes through the priesthood via the sacraments. His theses were anti-sacerdotalistic and he spoke against the theology that ex opere operato[4]supernatural life could be created through baptism, brought to growth by confirmation, nourished by the Mass, and healed of all diseases by penance and extreme unction. Luther vehemently rejected the idea that through sacraments a priest could control an individual’s life both here and hereafter.

Luther claimed that everyone who does have faith in Jesus Christ is a priest. He wrote that his hope was for a day when “ we shall recover that joyful liberty in which we shall understand that we are all equal in every right, and shall shake off the yoke of tyranny, and know that he who is a Christian has Christ, and he who has Christ has all things that are Christ’s, and can do all things.”[5]The concept that all who believe in Christ are priests came into mind to Luther after he became convinced that Scripture was the only authority for a Christian. Believers are called to be the salt and the light

(Matthew 5: 13), this is only possible when the believers understands Christ's priestly ministry and its own priestly role. This also has serious eschatological implications, as Christ comes to be united with his bride, the Church. Will He find a fragmented body or a united family of believers? Hence this paper mainly examines that where from the concept of "priesthood of all believers" begins in the Bible and for what purpose; what is the context that steered Luther to raise this idea of 'priesthood of all believers'; the coherence between Luther's idea and the biblical idea of 'priesthood of all believers; and its implication to the present church of India.

## **I. THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT OF "PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS" IN THE BIBLE**

A priest is one who performs the sacrifices, makes the rituals and doing the work of mediator between God and man. He is the one responsible for offering the divinely appointed sacrifices to God, for executing ceremonies relating to the worship of God. In other sense, he is the representative between man and God. Scripture says, "For every high priest, being taken from among men, is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins." [6] The priestly office came first in time, when our first parents sinned and fell from the high estate into which they had been created. God Himself performed the priestly office when He slew animals and provided a covering for Adam and Eve. [7]

### **A. PRIESTHOOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

There were three orders of men in the Old Testament times such as the kingly, the prophetic and the priestly orders. They were set apart by anointing with holy oil for a particular vocation. A king in the Old Testament

was one who ruled men for God. A prophet was one who spoke for God to men. And a priest was one who spoke for men to God. Among all these three orders, even from the very beginning of the human race, the believers have performed priestly works. In the particular period, the head of the family was doing the priestly office. He would build an altar and offer a sacrifice for the help from God. Scripture gives enough evidence for that.

## **1. Priesthood in the Patriarchal Age**

In the Bible history, the first period is commonly known as Patriarchal Age. The word “ patriarch” comes from two root words meaning “ father rule.” It encompasses the period between the creation events, and the time when Israel was separated as a special nation at Sinai for the preparation of the coming Messiah. In Genesis 4: 3-5 both Cain and Abel functioned in the capacity of priest in that each was responsible for his own offering to God. We could see that when Noah disembarked the ark following the great flood, he offered sacrifices on behalf of his family.[8]Abram, after a long march from Ur, came into Canaan and built an altar at Shechem.[9]Again and again, Abraham offered sacrifices to God, as did his sons and grandsons. Thus, originally in man’s relations with God, every individual functioned as his own priest before God with no particular location established for sacrificing and with no intermediary between him and God.[10]When He gave the Law at Mount Sinai, the people of Israel had been given an opportunity to become a kingdom of priests.

“ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”[11]

Here God makes a covenant with all the people of Israel. Based on the above text, the people of Israel become God's possession and are chosen for the privilege of service. God instituted the priesthood of Israel as a congregated unit for the purpose of service to the world. This is the vocation of the "people of God" of which each member stands under God's call, and each is accountable for his or her response to it.

## **2. A Shift on Priesthood**

But Israel disobeyed and God removed the opportunity for becoming a kingdom of priests. When Moses went up to the mountain to receive a list of rules and regulations for the newly freed nation, God also gave him instructions to form a "professional priesthood." Now each layman would no longer be his own priest, the individual could no longer take his sacrifices directly to God.[12] Here God selected Aaron and his family and the tribe of Levi to be His priests. They were set apart that when Israelites entered the Promised Land, the priests and Levites received no inheritance of land as the other eleven tribes. They had been set apart for the service of God and were to be supported by the tithes and offerings of the peoples' sacrifices. The sons of Aaron and the tribe of Levi had at least three distinctive as priests.

1. They had direct access to God. At appointed times they went into the Holy Place and even the Holy of Holies to communicate with God.
2. The priests represented God to the people of Israel. They were mediators who communicated the Word of God to the people since they were considered holy.

3. The people represented the people of Israel to God. The people could not approach a holy God directly because of their sin. The priests were mediators for the people as they brought sacrifices before the altar. The high priest entered the Holy of Holies yearly once on the Day of Atonement to offer an atoning substitute of a bull or lamb offering. One of the most important features of the priestly system was to emphasize the absolutely holy nature of Almighty God. This is a concept repeatedly affirmed in the Scriptures.[13]

## **B. PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

This was the situation continued Jesus Christ was crucified. At the same moment of Jesus' death, the veil of the Temple was ripped from top to bottom.[14] From then on there has been no need for select group of priests. At that point in time and ever since then believers became priests, a part of God's "royal" or "kingly" priesthood. The elimination of the office of priests as a select group of people is based, then, upon the physical sacrifice of Jesus, the ultimate High Priest. Jesus completed and fulfilled the role of priest in His substitutionary death.

"... but He became a priest with an oath when God said to Him: 'The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind: You are a priest forever.' Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant ... because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely ... Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. ... Unlike the other high priests, He does not need to offer sacrifices day after

day, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when He offered Himself. For the law appoints as high priest men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.”[15]

The priest, then, is the person who himself has access to God and whose task it is to bring others to Him. While in the ancient world this access to God was the privilege of the professional priests, and in particular of the High Priest who alone could enter into the Holy of Holies. But now through Jesus Christ, the new and living way, access to God becomes the privilege of every Christian.

The word “ priest” comes from the Latin presbyter and the Greek presbyteros which simply means “ elder.” This word was later used to describe the leader of a community. In modern usage the term “ priest” seems to be derived more from the actual Greek word for priest hierous. [16]In the New Testament this word is never used to describe a class or caste of people separate from the people of God. Instead, it is used in the sense all God’s people are “ a chosen race, a royal priesthood”[17]The New Testament believers constitute the succession to the priesthood in old Israel, having been given the right of direct access to God through Christ. Furthermore, the ministry in the church has replaced the ancient priesthood. Hence, all the believers in Christ are priests in the New Testament.

Put into historical perspective, the priesthood concept would look like this: for the first several thousand years mankind’s history as recorded in the Bible, each man was responsible for functioning as a priest before God. Then,

for approximately 1500 years, the time between Moses and when Christ appeared on earth, the priesthood of the professional existed. From the death of Christ until He returns again, we have reverted to the pre-Sinai days of the priesthood of the believer.[18]

## **II. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MARTIN LUTHER'S REFORMATIVE THOUGHT**

It is better to look back the history of the church to understand that how the New Testament idea of “priesthood of all believers” was perverted into the Roman Catholic Idea of Institutionalism.

### **A. PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS IN THE EARLY CHURCH HISTORY**

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is found throughout the Scriptures and was practiced in the early church. As Dr. R. Laird Harris writes, “First century Christianity had no priests. The New Testament nowhere uses the word to describe a leader in Christian service.”[19] But this glorious doctrine was gradually replaced by ‘sacerdotalism’ beginning in the third century, especially by Cyprian (c. 258) Bishop of Carthage. Cyprian treated “all the passages in the Old Testament that refer to the privileges, the sanctions, the duties, and the responsibilities of the Aaronic Priesthood, as applying to the officers of the Christian Church.”[20] He completely failed to grasp the central thesis of the Epistle to the Hebrews. He was blind to the fact that “the only High Priest under the Gospel recognized by the apostolic writings is our Lord Himself”[21] and not a solitary pope or bishop or priest of the church. So from the third century onwards the priesthood of all believers was not visible in theological thinking.



But the Roman Catholic theologians justified ‘ sacerdotalism’ by saying that Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom to Peter, the rock upon whom Jesus would build his church. Further they says that Peter was the first pope of Rome, and so the pope of Rome by succession has the power of the keys of the kingdom to bind and loose, and even to save. Salvation is deposited in the Roman priesthood and dispensed through the sacraments. The sacraments are effectual ex opere operato, meaning the subjective condition of the priest or the recipient does not matter. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that there is no salvation outside of the priesthood’s mediatorial function, and no person by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ may approach the Father with confidence!

## **B. PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS IN THE MEDIVAL PERIOD**

By the successive centuries, the Roman Catholic hierarchy and other religious groups make a sharp distinction between the laity and the clergy. Such distinction was foreign to the early church where the ultimate authority in ministry traces back to the risen Lord. Along with the structural hierarchy is the sacrament of ordination. The church in Rome imposes the sacrament of ordination that results in the marked separation between the clergy and the laity.[22]Christianity had been plagued with it ever since. More and more the church began to structure itself on the basis of the former Levitical order, rather than on the purely New Testament idea of “ each man is a priest” perspective. The change was slow and evolutionary, but pastors gradually came to be called “ priests” and the believers “ laity.” The communion table became an altar and the elements a sacrifice.

At the dawn of the Reformation Era, the institutionalized church already would have two major distinguished bodies within the community of believers: the clergy and laity. The status lay people, both in principle and in practice, would not only subordinate to the priests, but also widens the gap between clergy and laity. The gap became synonymous with the sacred and the profane.[23]

But godly men such as Peter Waldo, John Wyclif and John Hus saw the distinct difference and distance between the clergy and laity. They didn't like it, for it was in opposition to the teachings of the New Testament. Until the dramatic impact of the Protestant Reformation, these smaller movements had little pervasive influence.[24]

### **C. PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS IN THE REFORMATION ERA**

During the Reformation era the concept of the priesthood of all believers became very contentious within the structures of the Institutional church. The Reformation era provides a framework in tracing the concept of the priesthood of all believers. An elucidation on how Martin Luther formulated the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers will be dealt with in the pages to follow.

The concept that all who believe in Christ are priests occurred to Luther after he became convinced that Scripture was the only authority for a Christian. As he studied the Bible, especially Paul's Epistle to the Romans, he discovered that in and through Jesus Christ a believer possessed the righteousness of God, and therefore, immediate access to God without the

mediation of an arrogant priesthood. Thus, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is a sequel to the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Those who are clothed in the perfect righteousness of God are welcome in the presence of God. No Christian needs a pontiff, meaning a bridge builder, because Jesus Christ alone is the way to the Father.

There were other efforts at reforming the Catholic Church, seeking to bring it back to a more biblical posture, but they all fell short of their goal. It was not until such “reforming” seeds germinated in a favorable political climate that fruit would be born. The date was October 31, 1517. The place was Wittenberg, Germany. An obscure priest named Martin Luther nailed his grievances to the church door, the Reformation was born. A number of changes were called for by this bold, imaginative priest, but at the very core of the Reformation was the conviction that all believers are priests of the living God. He felt that all believers had the right and responsibility to study God’s Word, involve themselves in the ministry, make confession to God on their own, and even administer the sacraments.[25]

What had started in 1517 as a protest against indulgences by an unknown monk, developed in 1520 into an irreconcilable conflict dividing the Western Church. The three treatises of “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” and “The Freedom of a Christian” are the heart of Luther’s protest against the church of his day. The first was written in August, the second in October, and third in November. In great part, Luther’s tract is a catalog of the deplorable state of Christendom. The pope exalts himself over secular rulers as well as over the church, and lives in unconscionable luxury. Rome is a moral cesspool where licenses to

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live in open debauchery can be bought and sold. The Church has become a machine for making money, and the pope's henchmen, having bled Italy dry, have now turned their attention to Germany. Because of their inability to live up to the arbitrary rule of celibacy, many pious priests keep wives, yet do so secretly and with a bad conscience. The universities ignore the Bible and lecture on commentaries, and on commentaries on commentaries. The common people are ignorant even of basic Christianity.[26] In such a situation, Luther did write his treatises. Primarily, his first treatise of "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" occupied the central theme of the "priesthood of all believers." Here it is better to examine the background that led Martin Luther to raise the concept of "priesthood of all believers."

## **1. To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation**

### **a) Priesthood of All Believers As Social Implication**

In his first treatise of 'To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation' the concept of priesthood of all believers has social, ecclesiastical and spiritual implications. At the dawn of the Reformation era, the institutionalized church already would have two major distinguished bodies within the community of believers such as clergy and laity. Socially, he accepted the context of western Christianity, where temporal rulers belong to the body of Christendom. Within the Christian social order, the rulers are ordained of God to punish evildoers and protect those who do good. When pressed by the temporal power the Romanists have made decrees and declared that the temporal power had no jurisdiction over them, but that, on the contrary, the spiritual power is above the temporal.[27]

Luther argues against the medieval division between the temporal and the church authorities and their separate jurisdictions in all matters. First of all, he attacked the social distinction that emphasized by the Romanists,

“ It is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and for this reason: all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office.”[28]

He maintains that all Christians are equally Christian so that none is superior to any other as far possessing what is essential to the church,

“ because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people.”[29]

Relying upon 1Corinthians 12: 12-13, which describes the Church as the body of Christ and each member a part of that body, Luther acknowledges differences between Christians, not as questions of status, however, but as occasions for service to others. All are not the same in what God has given them to do, but they are all the same in what God has given them to be in the Church, viz., His very own people. All Christians, therefore, have the same status. By quoting 1Peter 2: 9 and Rev. 5: 9-10, Luther describes that status as “ priest” and ascribes it to every Christian, “ As far as that goes, we are all consecrated priests through baptism.”[30]So what differentiates Christians is simply the work that God has given them to do:

“ There is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes[31]

As part of the divine economy, God has given to each Christian a particular calling in this life whereby he serves others,

“ Everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work or office so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one another (1Cor. 12: 14-26).”[32]

As examples of such vocations in the body of Christ, Luther mentions cobblers, smiths, peasants, and temporal authorities besides the clergy. But what is noteworthy about the last, those who have as their vocation “ the administration of the Word of God and Sacraments,”[33] is that they are exercising an authority that belongs in the first instance to every Christian. For besides designating one’s status before God, Luther’s concept of the priesthood of believers also includes spiritual power in the church.

## **b) Priesthood of All Believers as Ecclesiastical Implication**

Luther rejects ecclesiastically, the clergy’s monopoly on interpreting Scripture. He attacks the second wall of Romanists that only the pope may interpret the Scripture, determining correct doctrine, forgiving sins, and exercising discipline. There is no Scriptural warrant at all for the claim that only the pope may interpret the Bible. Here Luther clarifies the illusion that some of the Romanists claim of the power that was given to St. Peter.

“ Although they allege that this power was given to St. Peter when the keys were given him, it is clear enough that the key were not given to Peter alone but to the whole community. Further, the keys were not ordained for doctrine or government, but only for the binding or loosing of sin.”[34]

As handlers of Scripture the Romanists are manifestly incompetent, and this makes their claim to hold a monopoly on biblical interpretation absurd. The Romanists must admit that there are among us good Christians who have the true faith, spirit, understanding, word, and mind of Christ. Luther’s main point is that the Pope isn’t the only person able to read the scriptures. He writes, “ Has not the Pope often erred?” Here Luther implies that the Pope isn’t God, and that he makes mistakes.[35]The Pope, therefore, can misinterpret the Bible. Luther shows that the Pope is like everyone else, so therefore others can interpret the scriptures as well. Luther then uses the Bible as a way to prove the second wall wrong. Luther quotes Christ’s words, “ And they shall be all taught of God”(St. John vi. 45). Everyone should be able to interpret the scriptures and be taught of God, without the Pope’s help. Furthermore he questions,

“ Besides, if we are all priests, as was said above, and all have one faith, one gospel, one sacrament, why should we not also have the power to test and judge what is right or wrong in matters of faith? What becomes of Paul’s words in 1Corinthians 2: 15, “ A spiritual man judges all things, yet he is judged by no one”? And 2Corinthians 4: 13, “ We all have one spirit of faith”? Why, then, should not we perceive what is consistent with faith and what is not, just as well as an unbelieving pope does”?[36]

Even more, Luther attacks the third wall of Romanists. He argues that there is no basis either in the nature of a Christian society or in Scripture for the Romanists' refusal to call a council. Luther brings up that St. Peter wasn't the only person to call a council: " Thus we read in Acts 15 that the council of the Apostles was not called by St. Peter, but by all the Apostles and the elders." [37] Also, nowhere in the scriptures does it say that the Pope is allowed to call a council by himself. Therefore their threats can be safely ignored, and a council should be called without delay to deal with a long list of abuses in the Church. Ordinary people and temporal authorities have the right and duty to do this, not only by virtue of their status as kings and priests before God, but because the crisis in the Church demands it.

" Would it not be unnatural if a fire broke out in a city and everybody were to stand by and let it burn on and on and consume everything that could burn because nobody had the authority of the mayor, or because, perhaps, the fire broke out in the mayor's house? ...How much more should this be done in the spiritual city of Christ if a fire of offense breaks out, whether in the papal government, or anywhere else?" [38]

Therefore, Luther concludes that it is the duty of every Christian in the Church as having the responsibility of priesthood of all believers; he has to espouse the cause of the faith, to understand and defend it, and to denounce every error.



### **c) Priesthood of All Believers as Spiritual Implication**

Luther declares that since we have one baptism, one gospel one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people. He quotes 1Peter 2: 9,

“ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Yet all are alike consecrated priests, everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work or office so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one another. Mainly all should share the three priestly functions such as prayer – intercede with God on behalf of others, proclamation – speak the gospel sharing it with the neighbor, and sacrifice – living a cross-centered and servant oriented life. Since the Church is in a state of crisis and someone has to act. The temporal authorities and ordinary lay people can and should do so because there are no inherently “ unspiritual” vocations, because all Christians in all vocations are kings and priests, and because the deplorable state of the Church is the concern of every Christian.

## **2. The Babylonian Captivity of the Church**

Nevertheless, the second treatise of Luther, “ The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” also has the influence of the idea of priesthood of all believers. In this treatise, he discusses and dismantles the medieval sacramental system. In a measured but powerful way, Luther subjects each of the seven medieval

sacraments such as baptism, Eucharist, penance, confirmation, marriage, ordination, and extreme unction to the critique of God's Word and concludes that "there are, strictly speaking, but two sacraments in the church of God – baptism and the bread (Eucharist). For only in these two do we find both the divinely instituted sign and the promise of forgiveness of sins"[39]

Not surprisingly, in his di