

Ordination Into Holy Orders
Addendum #4: The Priesthood of All Believers
ICCEC U.S. Theological Commission
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The priesthood of all believers is discussed in the introduction to the ICCEC Catechism where it states: “We are a church open to the historic working of the Holy Spirit. We believe that through the baptism of the Holy Spirit all believers are empowered to participate in the fullness of ministry. The baptism of the Holy Spirit releases in the believer both the fruit and gifts of the Spirit for the building up of the church and the advancement of the Kingdom.”¹ The ICCEC Catechism addresses both the clergy ordained under Holy Orders and the priesthood of all believers. It is stated that “the ministers of the Church are all baptized members. It is through baptism that all Christians participate in the priesthood of all believers.”²

The consensus of Christian tradition acknowledges that the Episcopal “hierarchy of order and jurisdiction” gradually developed from the way in which authority and ministry were established in the Churches of Acts. The specific role of deacons and the distinction of priests from the bishops were recognized with increasing clarity as time advanced.³ Belief in a ministerial priesthood⁴ by no means excludes a priesthood of all believers, but rather presupposes its existence. The idea of an ordained priesthood and the idea of a priesthood of all believers has advanced harmoniously through the centuries, and has never disappeared from Christian theology.

The Church commissions and authorizes people to exercise a ministry or service to the Body of Christ, as can be seen in the book of Ephesians.

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting. Eph 4:11–14 (NKJV).

¹ Introduction to the ICCEC Catechism

² ICCEC Catechism: Answer to Q-95.

³ Pohle, J. (1907–1913). *Priesthood*. In C. G. Herbermann, E. A. Pace, C. B. Pallen, T. J. Shahan, & J. J. Wynne (Eds.), *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church: Vols. I–XV*. The Encyclopedia Press; The Universal Knowledge Foundation.

⁴ Ministerial priesthood describes those in Holy Orders whether bishops, priests, or deacons.

All Christians are called to do “the work of ministry” and to cooperate in the “building of the body.” The idea of equipping God’s people is of far-reaching significance for understanding the priesthood of all believers. For the word *ministry* (*diakonia*) is here used not to describe the work of the ordained ministry but rather the work of the laity, that is, of all God’s people without exception. Here is clear evidence that the New Testament envisions Christian service and ministry in the gifts of the Spirit as the privileged calling of all the people of God.⁵

The profound ideas of both the ministerial priesthood and a universal priesthood of all believers are found throughout scripture. For example in Hebrews the Priesthood of Christ is after the Order of Melchizedek.

And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest “according to the order of Melchizedek,” (Heb 5:9–10 NKJV)

Christ did not assume the office of priest, but he received it from God, as the Scripture attests, understanding Pss 2:7 and 110:4 as addressed to him. One should note that the latter passage speaks only of a priest, not a high priest. Melchizedek will be “elevated” to the high priestly status according to Heb 5:10 because this status is important for the author’s argument. Verses 7–9 of the fifth chapter of Hebrews demonstrate the solidarity of Christ with human beings in weakness,⁶ Through the Incarnation Christ identifies with believers in their weaknesses. Believers are to identify with Christ through being transformed (Rom 12:2) to become new creatures (2 Cor 5:17–21), to become the people of God (1 Pe 2:9–10) and partakers of the divine nature (2 Pe 1:3–4).

For St. Peter, the entire church is a people belonging to God (2:9), and so is a chosen race, a royal dwelling place, a holy nation.⁷ Our understanding of the Priesthood of Believers is based mainly upon this admonition of St. Peter.

Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, “Behold, I lay in Zion A chief cornerstone, elect, precious, And he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.” Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, “The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone,” and “A stone of

⁵ Stott, J. R. W. (1979). *God’s new society: the message of Ephesians* (pp. 165–167). InterVarsity Press.

⁶ This argument is a subtle one because Jesus has been declared to be sinless (Heb. 4:15) and thus cannot offer “sin offerings for himself as well for the people.

⁷ See Ex 19:3–6

stumbling And a rock of offense.” They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

(1 Pe 2:4–10 NKJV).

The Church has gone from being “not my people” to being “my people,” from “not having received mercy” to “having received mercy”.⁸ Both the “stone” and “people” images in this passage speak of Christian’s election by God and personal holiness. As a household of priests, each believer is supposed to offer the “spiritual sacrifice” of a holy lifestyle characterized by faithfulness and obedience (1 Pe 2:5). And as a holy nation Christians tell the story of the holy God and his saving deeds, mirroring the story of Israel in the Old Testament. Referring to Christians as a priesthood is a way of affirming their holy status before a holy God and an exhortation to act holy and worship God. These images do not reject formal worship in the Church or the Eucharistic Sacrifice, nor do they argue against sacramental leadership for this priesthood of believers. Their sole purpose is to tell the church of its exalted status as “chosen” and “holy.”⁹

There are those who individualize this text in a way that blunts or even denies its corporate emphasis. The corporate priesthood described in these verses is a summons to every individual to share this common priesthood. The Christian community is constituted to orient its life and devotion to the God to whom it owes its constitution. It should be noted that the theme of obedience and holiness is the focus of this passage. This passage calls the church a “holy nation” and “royal priesthood” whose purpose is to declare God’s praises. These terms pertain to the whole church, rather than to just the clergy. Ex 19:3-6 speaks of the entire Israelite community as ‘priestly’ without thereby passing judgment on the Levitical priesthood. In like manner St. Peter speaks of all Christians being a royal priesthood without denying the ministerial priesthood when he refers to a ‘priesthood’ exercised by all Christians.¹⁰

⁸ See Hos 1:6, 9; 2:1

⁹ Bergant, D., & Karris, R. J. (1989). *The Collegeville Bible commentary: based on the New American Bible with revised New Testament* (p. 1231). Liturgical Press.

¹⁰ Himes, P. A. (2017). *1 Peter* (D. Mangum, E. Vince, & A. Salinger, Eds.; 1 Pe 2:5–9). Lexham Press.

The Church by consensus has acknowledged a priesthood of all believers. Church fathers such as Justin Martyr,¹¹ Irenaeus,¹² Origen,¹³ Leo the Great,¹⁴ Augustine,¹⁵ and Thomas Aquinas¹⁶ all assumed the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.¹⁷

Unquestionably, both the priesthood of all believers and the ministry of ordained clergy are vital to the Church's health and calling. The Church is supposed to encourage and engender the blessings and gifts of all members. The Church needs every gift, every grace, and every member's participation in order to grow and function properly. The gifts of some members are more visible than others, but that does not make them more valuable. Those that appear "weaker" may actually be more indispensable. So we honor all the parts of the Body and care for the whole body as one. We suffer as one and we rejoice as one. No member of the Body should feel irrelevant to the life of the church simply because they do not have the gifts and callings of others. The Church is the Body of Christ to the world. It is a family that is strengthened when each part works properly, and it is also a spiritual temple that builds itself up as members lovingly fulfill their responsibilities. God has arranged the church so that through its many members it works as one body for its own good and for God's glory (1 Cor 12:12–26).

For the Church to develop into the healthy and resilient body that God wants her to be, all members of the church must be encouraged to discharge the stewardship of their gifts in faithfulness and in devotion to the overall ministry of the Church. The prayers of the whole Church, whether offered by the individual in secret, in family prayer, or in public worship, are heard and blessed by God as he pours out his grace and Spirit in response to the Church's frailty and need. Service and good works of the whole Church are necessary for the fullness of ministry in each congregation. All members of the Church, not just her leaders, should encourage, correct, admonish, exhort, console, and edify, one another.¹⁸ We need the priesthood of all believers to be fully functional in each congregation.¹⁹

¹¹ *Dialogue with Trypho* 116

¹² *Against Heresies* IV.8.3

¹³ "De orat.", xxviii, 9; "In Levit.", hom. ix, 1

¹⁴ *Sermo*, iv, 1

¹⁵ *City of God* XX.10

¹⁶ *Summa*, III, Q. lxxxii, a. 1

¹⁷ Troxel, A. C. *What Is the Priesthood of Believers*, Westminster Seminary Press; P&R Publishing (2019), p. 11.

¹⁸ John R. Crawford, *Calvin and the Priesthood of All Believers*, Scottish Journal of Theology 21 (1968): p. 154.

¹⁹ Op. cit., Troxel, p. 23.