



## The priesthood of all believers

The month of October traditionally marks the anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, which was one of the most influential and blessed events in the history of the world and particularly of the church. The benefits of the Reformation, in which Luther and Calvin were prime instruments in God's hand, are beyond calculation.

We in the Reformed church today are still the unworthy heirs. But we may not glory in being heirs of the Reformation without knowing specifically in what way the Reformation brought to us a blessed heritage. Indeed, our Reformation heritage is very great, and an exhaustive treatment of it would fill volume upon volume. We shall briefly treat but one of the most significant aspects of the Protestant Reformation, which is the fact that it rediscovered the universal office of all believers. That is, every Christian believer is the holder of three offices in the church of Jesus Christ. He is at once a prophet, priest, and king. But even this is a wide subject. So in this article we will narrow the discussion even more and briefly treat only the subject of the priesthood of all believers.

The Reformers, Luther and Calvin, once again discovered, not invented, the wonderful truth taught in the Bible of the universal office of believers. But the Reformers stressed particularly the priesthood of all Christians. Every Christian is a priest. Now, of course, it does not surprise us that Luther and Calvin so strongly emphasized this particular office. The Roman Catholic Church had, and still has, only a special order of priests who lord it over the rest of the membership. Luther and Calvin insisted that there is no special order of priests, but rather every true Christian is a priest. Rome, of course, has an unbridgeable gulf between the clergy and the laity. They are two entirely different classes, or even kinds, of people. The clergy are the spiritual, holy people who rule and lord it over the laity. This distinction or gulf is not found in the Bible. We find in both the Old and New Testaments that although there is the special office of prophet, priest, and king, there is nonetheless the general office of *all* believers being prophets, priests, and kings. And it is particularly in view of Rome's denial of these general offices and its distinction between a special order of priests and the general membership that the Reformers particularly stressed the priesthood of all Christians.

The Heidelberg Catechism gives us a beautiful summary of the universal office of all believers in Q32. *"Why are you called a Christian?"* That is, why is it right that we who are believers in Jesus Christ should be called Christians? The answer is not that we of ourselves chose to be such or have some virtue and quality which another order of people does not have, but rather, *"because by faith I am a member of Christ and thus a partaker of his anointing, in order that I also may confess his Name, and present myself **a living sacrifice of thankfulness to him**, and that with a free conscience I may fight against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter in eternity reign with him over all creatures."*

How is it, then, that a Christian believer, whoever he is, is a Christian? It is simply that by faith we become members of Christ. But what does that involve? It means that such a one, whoever he is, is a "partaker" or sharer of Christ's anointing. But then what was Christ's anointing? That is explained for us succinctly in Q31. The anointing of Christ refers to His ordination by God the Father and qualification by God the Holy Spirit for the threefold office of Prophet, Priest, and King. We are Christians because we are members of Christ and thus share the anointing to that threefold office. Our priesthood, therefore, is rooted in Christ's priesthood. Every Christian is and must be a priest because he shares, is a partaker of, the anointing of Christ into that office. This of course goes contrary to the whole Roman Catholic concept of the special order of priests.

The universal office of believers goes back to the very beginning of time, to man's creation. Adam was created in the image of God. What does that mean? The image of God in man consisted of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. Heidelberg Q6 tells us that *"God created man good and after His own image, that is, in righteousness and true holiness."* In other words, because man was created by God with knowledge, he was a prophet, for knowledge is a necessity in a prophet. Because God created man righteous, man was a king, for righteousness is a necessity in a king. Because God created man holy, he was a priest, for holiness is a necessity in a priest. (Compare the requirements of holiness for the OT priest). With man's fall into sin this image was lost. However, it remained for Jesus Christ the chief Prophet, only High Priest, and eternal King, to restore us to that image in our regeneration or new birth, so that now the regenerated are once again prophets, priests, and kings. Colossians 3:10 is very explicit on this, for it speaks of our renewal or regeneration *"after the image of him that created"* us. Ephesians 4:24 speaks of the regenerated or new man as he that *"after God is created in righteousness and true holiness."* The Christian, having been recreated by the Spirit of God and made a partaker of Christ's anointing, is restored unto holiness, which is the prime requisite of a priest.

What should and does it mean to me for my daily life as a Christian that I am a priest? It means very much. It means, in the words of our Catechism, that *"I present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to him."* A priest, of course, makes a sacrifice. But our sacrifice today is not for the taking away of our sins. Our High Priest and He alone, has once and forever done that. Our sacrifice is not meritorious or atoning. Rather, our sacrifice as priests is entirely one of thanksgiving because atonement has been made for us. We now offer our very lives out of joyful and thankful hearts to God for his use and his glory. As priests we live holy lives of thanksgiving to God for we are restored to holiness in our regeneration by God's Spirit, as Colossians 3:10 plainly tells us.

It follows, surely, that he who does not live a holy life of thanksgiving to God is not a priest. And if not a priest, then he is not a member of Christ nor a partaker of Christ's anointing. In short, he is not a Christian! It must be evident in us that we have been *"made ... unto our God ... priests"* (Revelation 5:10).

Indeed, it would appear that we are today in need of another Reformation! The church needs to appreciate anew, if not rediscover, what the Reformers did, what it means to be a true priest.

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