

The Priesthood of No Believer: On the Priesthood of Christ and His Church¹

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is a doctrine which has in Protestant theological circles been neglected over the last fifty years.² The last significant treatment of the doctrine in the English language was Cyril Eastwood's two part consideration in 1960 and 1963.³ In the German language, the most recent significant work is Hans Martin Barth's *Einander Priester sein: Allgemeines Priestertum in ökumenischer Perspektive*, published in 1990. Furthermore, the doctrine has no significant presence in some of the seminal works of the twentieth century, and where it is discussed it is discussed largely in relation to the polity of the church rather than any genuinely theological content. For example, it is alluded to only three times in the whole of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and once more in the

¹ A version of the historical section of this article was given as the 2014 Fernley-Hartley Lecture, and a more constructive version as a keynote address at the 2015 Meeting of Society for the Study of Theology.

² I use the word 'Protestant' deliberately. Although classically thought of as a doctrine associated with the Reformation, Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* and the post-Vatican II emphasis on the whole people of God has determined that some of the more thorough and interesting discussions of this doctrine have been from Roman Catholic sources. See, for example, Hans Küng, *The Church* (London: Continuum, 2001), 370-88. The one exception in Protestant circles might be Robert Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009), which is a relatively short book which considers the basic biblical material and a condensed view of the classical doctrine, but seeks to discuss in this a diversity of figures to establish a trinitarian ecclesiology and then pursues post-modern cultural forms in relation to the attitudinal form of the royal priesthood, and how such attitudes and values can be embedded in the practices of congregations. There is no real theological or historical consideration of the meaning of the priesthood of all believers, with no content from the fathers and a dependence on secondary sources in relation to Luther.

³ *The Royal Priesthood of the Faithful: An Investigation of the Doctrine from Biblical Times to the Reformation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009); *The Priesthood of All Believers: An Examination of the Doctrine from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

Gesamtausgabe;⁴ it is discussed primarily in relation to polity in Moltmann's *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*;⁵ it plays only a minor role in volume three of Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*; and is touched on only three times in Tillich's *Systematic Theology* in relation to issues of equality and polity.⁶ While the likes of T. F. Torrance and Bonhoeffer do discuss the doctrine a little more (though primarily always with an eye to polity), it does appear that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is something of a Cinderella waiting to be taken to the theological ball, while its ugly sisters of ecclesial governance and orders of ministry dance the night away. Although Brian Gerrish considered the doctrine to be one of the three main points of evangelical theology (along with biblical authority and salvation by faith),⁷ and although T. W. Manson understood the doctrine to be, in the words of Bishop Kirk of Oxford, 'the decisive formula of all non-episcopal Christendom'⁸ (which might be thought to account in the world today for something in the region of 720 million Christians),⁹ theology in the twentieth century (and especially its latter half) seems to have followed Melancthon's advice at the Diet of Augsburg (1530) that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers should be relegated to the 'odious and unessential articles'.¹⁰

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2004) [henceforth cited as CD], IV/2, 964; IV/3, 33 & 888; cf. *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe, Gespräche 1959-1962, Pressekonferenz in Chicago* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005), 449.

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1977), 97.

⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 3 (London: SCM, 1978), 14, 192, 221.

⁷ Brian Gerrish, 'Priesthood and Ministry in the Theology of Luther', *Church History* 34/4 (Dec 1965), 404.

⁸ T. W. Manson, *Ministry and Priesthood: Christ's and Ours* (London: Epworth Press, 1958), 35.

⁹ Estimates are various and depend in part on whether Anglicans are classified in the various accounts as Protestant. See Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Global Christianity*, Feb. 2013, esp. 27.

¹⁰ Cf. Gerrish, 'Priesthood and Ministry', 404.

The reason for the decline of what has been since the Reformation and until recent times, at least in some quarters, a central doctrine might be variously considered. No doubt the ecumenical movement in the twentieth century has had something to do with this:¹¹ attempted mutual recognition of orders has determined a degree of care exercised in relation to discussing this (reputedly) most Protestant of doctrines, which ostensibly seems to call into question the very nature of orders itself; best to suspend such discussions for the sake of unity, seems to be the collective wisdom. Or else, in the English-speaking context, we might wish to look to the impact of the Anglo-catholic movement on the concept of priesthood in relation to the sacrifice of the mass and other rites as aiding a sacerdotalization of the pastorate. Furthermore, within the English-speaking world, there has always been little desire to remove notions of priesthood from the particular ministry of church leadership, as we see in Hooker's defence of the term 'priest', as a term which helps to point to 'that which the Gospel hath *proportionable* to ancient sacrifices, namely the Communion of the blessed Body and Blood of Christ, although it have properly no new sacrifice.'¹²

These suggestions, however, betray a deeper issue with the internal logics of many presentations of the priesthood of all believers, and in its sharpest expression this issue is as follows: the doctrine tends to enter discussion in relation to governance rather than more fundamental concerns. Put otherwise: while there may be inevitable implications for ecclesial polity, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers needs to be considered *theologically* in terms of what it says about the nature of the church, not the polity of the patterns of ministry of that church. If priesthood does not belong to any believer but to the *church*, what does this say about the nature and the function of *the church*? A strong version of the priesthood of all

¹¹ We see this, for example, in the way that Robert Jenson approaches the issue: *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chs 26-7.

¹² Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (London: Belknap Press, 1981), V.73.2.

believers should suggest that priesthood has nothing to do with orders of church governance in the narrower sense; that we are engaging in a category mistake if we think of polity in relation to priesthood. But the question is not, then, what this means *negatively* for the patterns of ministry of the church; the question is what this means positively as a doctrinal claim about the nature of the church. It is for this reason that the title of this article is ‘The Priesthood of *no* Believer’: the priesthood of all believers has an easy habit of becoming a discussion of the priesthood of *each* believer, individually and independently, in which each of us is considered our own priest. In that way, the doctrine falls victim to the very thing it seeks to avoid: individuals appropriate the very thing which in the work of Christ ends, and which is only continued as the believer participates in the body of Christ, in the whole life of the church. The priesthood of all believers is a doctrine that states that priesthood is no longer individual (whether in relation to ministers or the total number of individuals in the church), but corporate in the narrow sense of the term, relating to the body of Christ. The use of the title ‘priest’ for those exercising a particular ministry within the church has been so strong in its hold on the topic, that rather than concerning the *all*, the priesthood of all believers has concerned the question of *which* individuals are priests — those exercising a particular ministry or each member of the church.¹³

In order to establish the claim that the discussion of the priesthood of all believers has been skewed by discussions of polity and governance, however, it will be necessary to consider what it is that we mean by priesthood. This will involve tracing the evolution of the idea through the Levitical priesthood and NT to the early church, and then looking at what is at

¹³ Notions of the representative function of priesthood might help to allow an ecumenical approach to these issues in a way which does not undermine the central claims of this article. However, the danger remains that, even with representation, we think of priesthood as belonging most properly or appropriately to church leaders and not to the whole church.

stake in the term to try to uncover the earliest church's understanding of what it meant by priesthood. The article will then look at the recovery of the idea of priesthood not belonging to a set aside *clerus* but to the whole church at the reformation, but will argue that even here the magisterial reformers' ecclesial-political setting determines that they treat the priesthood of all believers dominantly as a negative doctrine about church order, so conditioned are they by the contextual settings in which they find themselves; and, indeed, that the relation of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers to issues of ecclesial polity and governance continues in contemporary ecclesiological discussion to the detriment of the positive theological content that identifying the church as a priesthood might offer. The concluding section of this article will begin to sketch (it can do little more) what positive theological content might be provided in speaking of the *church* as a priesthood. In order to do this, it will be argued that the motifs applied to the biblical and earliest Christian conceptions of priesthood should be used to help us consider the nature, identity and activity of the church.

1. Biblical Understandings of Priesthood

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is both a condition of and determined by a belief in *sola scriptura*. To say that it is a condition of the principal of *sola scriptura* is to say that it is a doctrine which suggests that all readers of the scriptures can read the text unmediated by another, and hear it as the direct Word of God; and — furthermore — that the text can be read as the direct Word of God unencumbered by the interpretation of a particular mediator or body of mediators. However, there is circularity here — not a negative circularity, but a circularity which suggests that the basis for such an approach to scripture is found internal to scripture's own teaching. This is the determination of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers *by* scripture. It is this second condition to which we attend when we seek what it is that scripture has to teach about the nature of priesthood.

It is almost undeniable, in the words of Tom Torrance, ‘that the term “priest” (*hiereus*) was never applied in the Apostolic Foundation of the Church to the ordained ministry, but was only applied to Jesus Christ himself and in the plural, in a corporate form, to the Church as a whole.’¹⁴ However, this does not mean that uncovering a sense of what was meant by priesthood in the scriptural canon is an unnecessary activity: quite the obverse, decisive theological material would be lost were we not to consider what the term *hiereus* involves for Christ and the writers of the New Testament.

The most immediate backdrop to this context is clearly the OT’s conceptualization of priesthood. In the space allowed, I can only really discuss the Levitical and not the pre-Levitical priesthood briefly in what follows.¹⁵ However, it is possible to identify certain motifs surrounding priesthood in the OT.¹⁶ Most immediately, priesthood involves the idea of **direct mediation and intercession** with God.¹⁷ We see this not only in cultic practices, but

¹⁴ Torrance, *Royal Priesthood* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), xv.

¹⁵ For a survey of understandings of priesthood in the Hebrew Bible, see Lester L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995); and Joachim Schaper, *Priester und Leviten im achämenidischen Juda* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

¹⁶ The following motifs are taken (creatively) from aspects of Torrance’s analysis of the concept of priesthood in the OT (*Royal Priesthood*, 1-16).

¹⁷ ‘The priest was a mediator, like the king and the prophet. But kings and prophets were mediators by reason of a personal charisma, because they were individually chosen by God; the priest was *ipso facto* a mediator, for priesthood is an institution of mediation.’ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), 357. De Vaux also argues that all other priestly functions stem from this primary function.

most overtly in the activity of Moses, whom Philo saw as the ‘high-priestly Logos’,¹⁸ communing with God and pleading for Israel’s forgiveness even if this were to involve his own damnation (Exod. 25:22; Num. 7:89). In witness to this activity, the Aaronic priesthood is founded. Indeed, the word *kohen* itself stems from a Semitic root form meaning ‘truthsayer’.¹⁹ This recognizes that the activity of the priest stems from cultic testifying to the activity of *God*. Thus, the second trope of priesthood is that of **witness to the covenant of God** with His people:²⁰ priests point beyond themselves and their cultic activity to the mercy and forgiveness of God. It is in this sense that we are to understand the third identifier of priesthood in the OT — **sacrifice**.²¹ Clearly, in both Jewish and Pagan understandings of priesthood, the act of sacrifice is central. These sacrifices, crucially, are not directly efficacious in themselves but *signs* of the efficacy of God’s forgiveness.²² It is, after all, *God*

¹⁸ De Somniis, I, 214 f., De Specialibus Legibus, I, 66, 241; cf. Gottlob Schrenk, ‘ἀρχιερεύς’, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), Vol. III, ed. Gerhard Kittel et. al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 274; Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 3.

¹⁹ Schrenk, TDNT, 3:257f.; Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 1.

²⁰ This is related to the office of teaching, which Anderson argues was of ‘far greater importance than is commonly realised’ (G. W. Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 77). Von Rad also makes this point: ‘our most important source for the pre-exilic priesthood, the oracle concerning Levi in the Blessing of Moses, names the giving of “torah” as the main function of the priest. The priests “teach” Israel Jahweh’s ordinances and his “torah” (Deut. xxxiii. 10). By “torah” we have to understand the priests’ instruction of the laity...’ (Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Volume I: The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1962, 2001, 244-5); see also de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 352-4 and Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*, 64-5.

²¹ Cf. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 355-6; Grabbe, *Priests Prophets, Diviners, Sages*, 64-5.

²² Cf. von Rad: ‘What is certain is that the priest as the mouthpiece of Jahweh pronounced the *placet* upon the offering or refused it. Thus, only the addition of the divine word made the material observance what it was meant to be, a real saving event between Jahweh and his people. Only in virtue of the declaratory word of the priest did the sacral event become a gracious act of God’ (*Old Testament Theology I*, 262). This sense of the

who meets with Aaron in the Holy of Holies: ‘You shall put the mercy-seat on the top of the ark; and in the ark you shall put the covenant that I shall give you. There *I* will meet you, and from above the mercy-seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, *I* will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites.’ (Exod. 25:21-2; cf. Num. 8:89). This sacrifice has a two-fold component, which are the fourth and fifth identifiers of priesthood: **oblation** and **bearing iniquity**. The priest not only witnesses in sacrifice to the covenant of God, but obediently offers praise and worship to God as the human response to and renewal of that covenant. In offering a sacrifice on the day of atonement, the priest not only risks his own life for the sake of the people in the coming into the very presence of God, but actually bears the iniquity of the people on his own forehead (Exod. 28:38; Lev. 10:17; Num. 18:1 & 23). The sixth motif of priesthood arises from the end point of the offering: the proclaiming of God’s **blessing and *shalom*** to the people (Num. 6:22-23).²³

Although far too telegraphic in form, it is this concept of priesthood which forms the NT context in which the language of *hierous* exists. It is important to note in the first instance with regard to the NT that whatever debates there are about the nature of the three-fold pattern of ministry or otherwise, the term *hierous* is never used of patterns of ministry. In that sense, John Milton is wrong at least in relation to the NT in saying famously: ‘New Presbyter is but Old Priest writ large.’²⁴ Although the term *hierous* (as the Septuagint’s rendering of *kohen*) is clearly available to the writers of the NT, they are *never* used in relation to ecclesial polity and governance. What we call and how we understand those who serve the church is

declaratory work of the priest becomes central to the way in which the Aaronic priesthood is used as an analogy to church leadership in Protestant theological discussions. See, for example, John Wesley, Sermon 121, Albert C. Outler (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley Volume 4: Sermons IV* (Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1987), 73-84.

²³ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology I*, 246.

²⁴ John Milton, ‘On the New Forces of Conscience under the Long Parliament’ (1646).

an entirely different discussion to what we mean by priesthood for the canonical writers. The term *hiereus* is only ever used in the singular (with the exception of referring to temple priests) of one person — Jesus Christ. Moreover, even Christ’s priesthood is something which displays not only continuity but also discontinuity with the Aaronic priesthood, since Jesus himself was not a Levitical, Aaronic or Sadducean priest; nor does Christ’s priesthood even seem to relate to more ancient traditions of the eldest child being the family priest. Instead, as the author of the Hebrews wishes to make clear, the priesthood of Christ is associated with the enigmatic figure of Gen. 14:17-20, Melchizedek, king of Salem, ‘the priest of God Most High’. In Melchizedek is a version of priesthood which precedes not only the Aaronic form, but even the election of Abraham: his is a priesthood which ministers to Abraham, but which is clearly more *universalized* than the priesthood which begins in Exodus; in that way, it is a more foundational priesthood than that which follows it. Furthermore, the priesthood of Christ is understood to be an *eternal* priesthood. The priesthood of Christ, therefore, represents — uncomfortable as this may be in a post-Shoah setting — a completion and supersession of the Aaronic priesthood based upon a form of priesthood antecedent to that of Israel’s priests: Christ’s priesthood completes priesthood for all people. As Hanson puts it:

Whether it [the Jewish cult] still operates or not, it has lost its significance. It was temporary, material, at best the prefiguring, unable to achieve permanent reconciliation with God for its practisers. Christ’s priesthood is permanent, indeed eternal, spiritual not material, and effective, so that it has achieved salvation for those who are involved in the new Christian cult.²⁵

²⁵ Hanson, *Christian Priesthood Examined* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1979), 24.

The only meaningful priesthood of which the NT speaks, therefore, in relation to an individual is the high-priesthood of Christ. This is a priesthood which is not bound to the temple observances of Israel, and is not focused only on the descendants of Abraham, but is greater than Abraham (Heb. 7:7) and the priesthood that stemmed from Abraham's descendants (Heb. 7:9-10).

Beyond this use of *hiereus* in relation to Christ, the only other two positive discussions of priesthood in the NT are corporate. 1 Pet. 2 speaks of a holy priesthood and a royal priesthood; and Rev. 1:6 speaks of a *nation* of priests. In sum, the idea of priesthood is never applied to any individual in the New Testament (beyond those who are temple priests) except Jesus Christ, and in relation to Jesus Christ, it is used in discontinuity from the Jewish temple and in relation to a broader category of people than the descendants of Abraham. In Christ, priesthood is **completed, universalized and spiritualized**.²⁶ But this may even in itself render an interpretation of a more ancient and original form of priesthood found in relation to the whole people of Israel in Exod. 19:5b-6a: 'Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.' The NT's corporate descriptions are a recovery or a midrash on the OT's tradition that Israel is to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation for all the earth: this task is passed on (or now includes) the church.

2. The sacerdotalizing of ministry: priesthood, sacrifice and unity

²⁶ This kind of approach is also similar in the Pauline corpus. Dunn states: 'Paul saw the new Christian assemblies as an extension of the assembly of Yahweh, but now without any of the cultic features so characteristic of Israel's temple cult, and without any category of priest as a function different in kind from the priestly ministry of all who served the gospel.' James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

How do we move to a situation, then, in which it is almost impossible to consider priesthood apart from the particular ministry of certain members of the church who are considered to constitute a *clerus*? This is a complex history, but two things are notable: first, that the process is a long one and is related to ideas of sacrifice; second, that the evolution to an idea of priesthood is innately bound up with the idea of unity.

If we look to the very earliest Christian texts, the *Didache* is unambiguous in seeing the service of worship as a meal, but makes no mention of a president, let alone a priest: the discussions of the eucharistic order are distinct to the discussions of officers of the church.²⁷ However, the *Didache* does see Sunday worship as a sacrifice (*thusia*). Hence, ‘first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one ... avoid profanation of your sacrifice.’²⁸ Furthermore, the trope of unity is also present. In the eucharistic liturgy (for a full meal at which all would be ‘satisfied’), the prayer to be said preceding the food is: ‘As this broken bread, once dispersed over the hills, was brought together and became one loaf, so may thy church be brought together ...’.²⁹ The symbolism here is a symbolism of sacrifice and unity.

Ignatius, although considered in some ways the father of the threefold form of ministry, never uses the term *hierews* except in relation to the priests of the OT.³⁰ His emphasis on church order is indeed strong, but the concern that preoccupies him in all of this is the *unity* of the church. The church is to be united as the clergy are to the bishop, so as to praise Jesus in ‘unison’ and ‘harmony’. Ignatius writes:

²⁷ *Didache* 9 & 10; cf. 15. Indeed, the instruction that ‘Prophets, however, should be free to give thanks as they please’ indicates that presidency was various.

²⁸ *Didache* 14; cf. Mal. 1:11 & 14.

²⁹ *Didache* 9.

³⁰ Ign.Phil., 9.1.

Pray, then, come and join this choir, every one of you; let there be a whole symphony of minds in concert; take the tone altogether from God, and sing aloud to the Father with one voice through Jesus Christ, so that He may hear you and know by your good works that you are indeed members of His Son's Body. A completely united front will help to keep you in constant communion with God.³¹

Indeed, this issue of unity is linked directly to Ignatius' teaching on the great high priest: in contrast to the priests of old, Jesus as high priest is the doorway to the Father for the descendants of Abraham and the prophets and the apostles and the whole church; 'for,' writes Ignatius, 'all these have their part in God's unity.' The point, therefore, is not that the church is subject to the bishop, but that the bishop teaches them how to be united to one another in Christ. And for what reason is it that they should be united? They should be united so as not to fail at the last to offer the ultimate sacrifice to God in martyrdom, being confident in their unity of receiving the eucharist that they are 'with undivided minds ... to share in the one common breaking of bread — the medicine of immortality, and the sovereign remedy by which we escape death and live in Jesus Christ for evermore'.³²

In Justin — writing at a time when the Bar Kochba revolt, the razing of the temple and the final conclusion of the Jewish cult at the Council of Yavne are in living memory — the NT ideas of the supersession and universalisation of the Aaronic priesthood are emphasized:

being vehemently inflamed by the word of His calling, we are the true high priestly race of God, as even God Himself bears witness, saying that in every place among the

³¹ Ign.Eph., 4.

³² Ign.Eph., 20.

Gentiles sacrifices are presented to Him well-pleasing and pure. Now God receives sacrifices from no one, except through His priests.³³

Again, it should be noted here that the themes of sacrifice and of unity are present: the whole race (notably of gentiles) is priestly and offers sacrifices to God.³⁴ Furthermore, it is likely that the charge of atheism, to which Justin responds in his First Apology,³⁵ involved not only issues relating to aniconic monotheism but also modes of worship, which would have placed a sharper demarcation between Christianity and other religions of the age: Jews may have been monotheistic but they were at least ancient, and had rituals and rites to which parallels could be found in pagan worship. Christians lacked even these.

Even by the time of Irenaeus, the concept of priesthood is important only in reference to the transference of priesthood from Judaism to the church, and in terms of spiritual sacrifices offered by a united church.³⁶ Thus, writes Irenaeus: ‘Inasmuch, then, as the church offers with single-mindedness, her gift is justly reckoned a pure sacrifice with God.’³⁷ Thus far, in church history, there is no concept of priesthood applying to any individual other than Christ, to the whole church as a body.

³³ Justin, ‘Dialogue with Trypho’, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 116.

³⁴ The point here that Justin is making is that the end of the cult sees a transference of priestliness to the gentile community which replaces the Jewish priesthood. In the context of the beginnings of rabbinical Judaism, it is easy to see how this replacement sees greater continuity with the Aaronic priesthood (fulfilling what it had previously fulfilled) than Hebrews does in relation to the priesthood of Melchizedek. This potentially, I think, opens the way for the idea of the church echoing the temple’s governance and order rather than being the temple.

³⁵ I Apol. 4-6.

³⁶ Ad.Haer. IV.16-17 in *The Writings of Irenaeus*, trans. Roberts and Rambaut (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1868).

³⁷ Ad.Haer. IV.16.4.

The shift in focus from Christ and the whole church as a united body to the clergy begins to take place with Tertullian in the third century.³⁸ Tertullian is happy to use the Latin term *sacerdos* primarily for the bishop (the *summus sacerdos*),³⁹ but also presbyters. However, as is similarly the case with Tertullian's Trinitarian terminology, he manages to supply much of the vocabulary but little of the theological content for that vocabulary, and does not connect this language of priesthood with presidency at the eucharist: sacrifice for him relates to prayer and not to the act of presidency at an altar.⁴⁰ Hippolytus also, in a Greek-speaking context, begins to use language of priesthood in relation to the apostles, who possess high priesthood (*archierateia*) according to him. By the time that we get to Origen, although there is some teaching in his later works which seems to speak of a priesthood of all believers,⁴¹ it appears to be normal to refer to bishops and presbyters as priests and high priests.⁴² The reasons for this change have been variously suggested: the final eradication of second temple Judaism and Christianity's increased distance from its Jewish origins allowing the term priest to be appropriated for community officials; a way of making sense of large swathes of the Torah in light of the new covenant; a way of communicating with pagan culture that could not understand Christian practices never mind monotheism; and/or a way of assimilating to pagan culture so as to avoid persecution by adopting the 'semblance' of traditional religion.⁴³

³⁸ Hans Frieherr von Campenhasuen, *Tradition und Leben Kräfte der Kirchengeschichte: Aufsätze und Vorträge* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960), 276.

³⁹ *De baptismo*, 17.1.

⁴⁰ E.g.: *De Ex. Cast.* 11:2; cf. Hanson, *Christian Priesthood Examined*, 49.

⁴¹ *De Oratione* 28.9; cf. Josef Vogt, *Das Kirchenverständnis des Origenes* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1974), 111-17.

⁴² E.g. *Lev.Hom.* 2.3.

⁴³ See B. Le Roy Burkhart, 'The Rise of the Christian Priesthood', *The Journal of Religion* 22/2 (Apr 1942), 187-204.

Whatever the reasons, this process of a sacerdotalizing of church order, which takes place around 200CE throughout the Christian world, appears to reach something of a climax in the figure of Cyprian. In Cyprian we find a clear relation of causation between the presence of clergy (who are considered analogous to the Aaronic priesthood)⁴⁴ and genuine sacrifice. He writes:

Does a man think he is with Christ when he acts in opposition to the bishops of Christ, when he cuts himself off from the society of His clergy and people? He is ... waging war upon God's institutions. An enemy of the altar, a rebel against the sacrifice of Christ; giving up faith for perfidy, religion for sacrilege; an unruly servant, an undutiful son and hostile brother, despising the bishops and deserting the priests of God, he presumes to set up a new altar, to raise unauthorized voices in a rival liturgy, to profile the reality of the divine Victim by pseudo-sacrifices ...⁴⁵

Even in Cyprian, however, we should note that these concerns are a shared form of those of earlier fathers: unity and sacrifice. The concern that he expresses is one orientated on preserving the unity of the body of Christ.⁴⁶ We see this emphatically in the discussions which follow his talk about the clergy:

God is one and Christ is one, and His Church is one; one is the faith, and one the people cemented together by harmony into the strong unity of a body. This unity cannot be split; that one body cannot be divided by any cleavage of its structure, nor

⁴⁴ *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, 18.

⁴⁵ *De Lapsis: The Unity of the Catholic Church*, trans. Maurice Bévenot (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 17.

⁴⁶ We should note that claims for the clergy are variously grounded in the idea of apostolicity in Cyprian; see, for example, *Unity*, 2-5.

cut up in fragments with its vitals torn apart. Nothing that is separated from the parent stock can ever live or breath apart; all hope of its salvation is lost.⁴⁷

The change that takes place with Cyprian is, however, that this unity is not grounded in the collective priesthood of the church, but in a set aside clergy who are now considered the priesthood: it is a single group exclusively within the church that grounds its unity, not the whole church. This group alone is related to the Aaronic priesthood which has passed from Moses to Christ to Peter to the pope.⁴⁸ Furthermore, access to God comes only through that group, as they are the means of true sacrifice and the guardians of salvation, since their presence is the identifying feature of the catholicity of the church, and since outside of the unity of the church, there is no salvation. This is clearly a movement away from the NT's and the very early church's understanding of priesthood. As Küng puts it:

the fact that the leaders of the community *exclusively* are seen as 'priests', and become a separate caste, after pagan and Judaic patterns, standing *between* God and men [and women] and barring direct access to God which the whole priestly people should enjoy — this ... is contrary to the New Testament message: both the message of the *one* mediator and high priest Jesus Christ and that of the one priesthood of *all* Christians.⁴⁹

It is this issue of the priestly caste which is the very thing to which the Reformers react.

However, that they *react* is of significance here: that is to say, it is of significance that they are strongly influenced by the context in which they find themselves, and their reflections are

⁴⁷ *Unity*, 23.

⁴⁸ This seems a potentially more pernicious form of supersession than the one discussed above: it is not that temple sacrifices can continue but are considered inefficacious by Christians; but instead that the efficacy has been superseded by an alternative sacrifice, with priesthood not ending for Christians but being superseded.

⁴⁹ Küng, *The Church*, 383.

determined by the ecclesiastical and theological positions they inherit and the situation they are in. While the reformers seek to recover an understanding of priesthood that relates more to pre-third century understandings of church order, their primary focus is the *polity* of this, and not the theological implications of it in relation to what it has to say about the nature of the church.

3. Reformation Polity: The Priesthood of all Believers

In the reformation period, we witness a negative reaction to the clericalisation of the church. This is indeed to such an extent that Brian Gerrish refers to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers as primarily serving the purpose of being ‘a polemical instrument against Rome.’⁵⁰ This is certainly the case when we look at the proceedings at Augsburg. Luther attacks the idea that the priesthood of Christ is conferred on Peter, and then transferred to the pope.⁵¹ Albeit somewhat polemically, ‘The Freedom of the Christian’ discusses the priesthood of Christ and relates this to believers in the church (but notably not the church in itself *per se*).⁵² The priesthood of Christ is related both to his status as first-born and the

⁵⁰ Gerrish, ‘Priesthood and Ministry’, 406. Clearly, it is worth recognizing here that the term ‘priesthood of all believers’ is a theological gloss on the teachings of the Reformers, and finds its mature expression in the teachings of Spener in 1675 (in his preface to the new edition of the sermons of Johannes Arndt). Luther does speak of ‘*das eynige gemeyne priesterthum*’ (WA 8: 254, 7), but does not use the phrase ‘*das allgemeine Priestertum aller Gläubigen*’ or any equivalent. Timothy Wengert emphasizes this in his ‘The Priesthood of all Believers and Other Pious Myths’, *Institute of Liturgical Studies Occasional Papers*, (2006), Paper 117; see also his *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops: Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008). However, that Luther did not directly coin the phrase is not to say that material content of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is not found in Luther: what Spener is pointing to in this tagline is a summary of what is said in the Reformation.

⁵¹ *Luther’s Works* (LW), ed. Pelikan and Lehman (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 31.279-81; cf. LW, 31.388-9.

⁵² On the priesthood of Christ in Luther, see LW 31.353-4.

discussion in Hebrews about Melchizedek. The meaning of this is unpacked for Luther in two ways — in relation first to prayer and intercession, and second to instructing in the word. It is this which then determines the priesthood of *each* member of the church. He writes: ‘Now just as Christ by his birthright obtained these two prerogatives, so he imparts them to and shares them with everyone who believes in him ... Hence all of us who believe in Christ are priests and kings in Christ’.⁵³ Furthermore, he relates this to the activity of Christ’s priesthood, stating: ‘as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things.’⁵⁴ What we see in Luther is, therefore, a denial that there is any laity. However, for Luther, priesthood is still directly related to polity: the question for him is what does it mean for *a Christian to be a priest him or herself*. Therefore, he has to address the question of what the implication of this is for the public polity of the church: this question remains a central concern for Luther and forms much of his discussion of the theme of the individual priesthood of a believer. Hence, having discussed this matter, he moves immediately to consider the implications of this for church governance, stating ‘[a]lthough we are all equally priests, we cannot all publicly minister and teach.’⁵⁵ Luther thereby introduces a distinction between private and public priesthood. This is a concern that we see developed in ‘Concerning the Ministry’.⁵⁶ In this, Luther once again affirms the priestliness of each Christian in terms of intercession and speaking the Word of God, and once again he does so in polemical discourse with Rome. Although he makes clear that ‘A Priest is not identical with Presbyter or Minister’,⁵⁷ he goes on to discuss dominantly matters of function and polity rather than developing in detail what the theological content of an affirmation of

⁵³ LW 31.354.

⁵⁴ LW 31.355.

⁵⁵ LW 31.356.

⁵⁶ LW 40.3-44.

⁵⁷ LW 40.18.

an ecclesial priesthood for Christians might be.⁵⁸ This arises from his continued affirmation of the individual priesthood of *each* believer, and his relation of this matter to the office of a public preacher or minister of the word. In short, Luther remains conditioned by the situation in which he finds himself, where priesthood is associated with a matter of office. Rather than fundamentally rethinking the issue, he polemically responds to it, and is thus brought into discussing issues of polity relating to each individual believer, rather than the issue of what it means for the *church* as a whole to bear the marks of priesthood. Luther continues, therefore, with the idea that priesthood passes to individuals; he just widens the number of individuals this involves.

In Zwingli, the matter is different. We find the assertion that priesthood is an inappropriate category with which to think about church polity and leadership. Thus, Zwingli argues that we should be concerned only with the priesthood of Christ, and that we should be careful that our discussion of this does not have as its object the intention of making ourselves into priests. Christ's priesthood is unique and unsubstitutable, and it differs absolutely from the line of succession of the Aaronic priesthood.⁵⁹ He states:

...it is impious to talk of an offering priesthood at all. I am not speaking of the ministers of the word and the Church. They are dispensers of the mysteries, that is, the hidden things of God [cf. I Cor. 4:1], and are not the priesthood of Christ; for that can

⁵⁸ Thus, Luther's concerns are far more ecclesially pragmatic given the situation of having to found and form a church, rather than dogmatically orientated.

⁵⁹ Cf. Bullinger also, *Of the Holy Catholic Church*, 311.

be nothing else than Christ Himself making satisfaction with the Father for us forever.⁶⁰

Zwingli, therefore, separates the idea of Christ's priesthood from ministry. But even then, he goes on to discuss issues of polity in relation to this; and indeed, he equivocates over the term priesthood. Thus, we might here note the qualifier of 'offering' priesthood. Zwingli, it seems, gives with one hand in terms of the non-relation of priesthood to church order, but takes with the other. So, he writes: 'For as ancient priests of the mysteries slew animals for a sweet savor unto the Lord [cf. Lev. 1:9], so shall the ministers of the word turn beastlike men into real offerings to God.'⁶¹ The ministry of the word is seen, therefore, as analogous to the ancient priesthood of the church. Furthermore, in his *Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*, far from affirming that there are no priests or that preachers assume an analogous priestliness to that of Aaron, there is the affirmation: 'the Lord Jesus Christ has called all Christians to kingly honour and to priesthood, so that they do not need a sacrificing priest to offer on their behalf, *for they are all priests*, offering spiritual gifts, that is, dedicating themselves wholly to God.'⁶² This equivocation is seen further in his sixty-seven articles in which he says that the scriptures know nothing of the form of consecration which priests have (62) and that the scriptures recognize no priesthood apart from 'those who proclaim the word of God' (63). The problem which Zwingli exemplifies is that he is unable to think outwith the

⁶⁰ Zwingli, 'On True and False Religion', *The Latin Works and the Correspondence of Huldreich Zwingli*, vol. III, ed. Jackson (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), 236-7; cf. Zwingli's account of the keys, 157-60.

⁶¹ Zwingli, 'On True and False Religion', 237.

⁶² Zwingli, *Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*, 88. In locating these three approaches to priesthood, it is possible to see that the description provided by Manson of Zwingli's account of priesthood is not quite as straightforward as is suggested: although Manson is right that for Zwingli there is no laity (*Christian Priesthood*), it is also the case that there is both a 'priesthood of the word' for ministers in a way analogous to the Aaronic priesthood, and at other points a rejection of priesthood altogether as a category.

bounds of polity in relation to priesthood, and is thereby conditioned by the very thing against which he is reacting: to write against polity determines that he is in one sense governed by it. He wishes to deny the consecration of a priestly caste but approaches the issue in relation to which aspects of authority belong to a particular group in terms of polity (some, all, or none), rather than asking the fundamental theological question of what it means for the *church* to be a priesthood.

Calvin is in certain ways similar to Zwingli, and also addresses the matter differently to Luther, seemingly clarifying the equivocation of Zwingli in relation to office. If the issue for Luther is that there is no-one who is lay, the issue for Calvin is that there is no-one who is a priest. He writes:

Christ was appointed and consecrated priest according to the order of Melchizedek by the Father with an oath, without end, without successor. He once for all offered a sacrifice of eternal expiation and reconciliation; now, having also entered the sanctuary of heaven, he intercedes for us.⁶³

Calvin does affirm that in Christ we are priests, but the notion of priesthood is greatly reduced. Since Calvin sees priesthood as being singularly to offer expiatory (or even propitiatory) sacrifices to God, and since this is done once and for all in Christ, to speak of the church as a ‘priesthood’ is reduced only to speaking of the church as being able ‘to offer praise and thanksgiving’.⁶⁴ Furthermore, although he correctly realizes that the priesthood of

⁶³ *Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: WJKP, 1960), 4.19.28 (1476).

⁶⁴ *Inst.* 4.19.28 (1476); cf. Calvin’s commentary on Heb. 13:5 and 1 Pet. 2:5: ‘It is a singular honor, that God should not only consecrate us as a temple to himself, in which he dwells and is worshipped, but that he should also make us priests. But Peter mentions this double honor, in order to stimulate us more effectually to serve and worship God. Of the spiritual sacrifices, the first is the offering of ourselves, of which Paul speaks in Romans

Christ is not Aaronic, and therefore those who claim to stand in continuity with Aaron do not stand in continuity with Christ, he makes this claim singularly in the negative without developing what it might mean for the whole people to share in Christ's priesthood, which is — as he affirms — 'foreshadowed and prefigured by all the ancient priesthoods.'⁶⁵ Again, Calvin addresses the issue of priesthood in relation to polity (in polemic with Rome), and does not develop the full theological implications of speaking of the priesthood of the church. He is able to see very clearly the negative implications of the priesthood of Christ for the clergy, but not the positive implications of the doctrine, since he discusses the issue dominantly in relation to church order and does not thereby develop what it means to say that in Christ we are *all* priests, as he claims.

In recent Protestant discussions of priesthood a similar tendency to discuss priesthood in relation to church polity and leadership prevails. In contemporary discussions, the polemical edge in relation to Rome has happily been lost. However, in their attempt to affirm that the priesthood of all believers is not related to governance, discussions of the priesthood of all believers have been drawn into polity, ending with discussions of church order, normally in a moderately ecumenical mood. Thus, Torrance's *Royal Priesthood* defends a high view of priestliness on the basis of apostolicity. While it seems ostensibly to talk about the priesthood of the church,⁶⁶ this is discussed in terms of apostolicity in relation to orders. For example, he writes in relation to the priesthood of the whole church (about which he says little materially):

12:1; for we can offer nothing, until we offer to him ourselves as a sacrifice; which is done by denying ourselves. Then, afterwards follow prayers, thanksgiving, almsdeeds, and all the duties of religion' (1 Peter 2:5, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, ed. and trans. John Owen [Edinburgh, 1855]).

⁶⁵ *Inst.* 4.19.30 (1478).

⁶⁶ Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, ch. 4.

The real priesthood is that of the whole Body, but within that Body there takes place a membering of the corporate priesthood, for the edification of the whole body ... This ministry is as essential to the Church as Bible and sacramental ordinances ...⁶⁷

Torrance's discussions, as the title of the book suggests, ultimately concerns *ordained* priesthood: in his work, all that is said about the priesthood of the church forms the foundation for what is said about polity, which is the real primary concern of the book, however theologically it is expressed. Similarly, in Hanson's *Christian Priesthood Examined*, having given a careful and critical examination of the concept of priesthood in the bible and the church through to its development in Anglican polity, the book concludes with a consideration of the meaning of priesthood today in relation simply and directly to orders of church governance. It seems that whatever is said about priesthood and the church, it is ultimately simply questions of polity that this concerns. Even within my own Methodist Church, the Deed of Union affirms the priesthood of all believers, and immediately defines this in relation to church order with regard to local and itinerant ministry. This seems tantamount to saying you are going to talk about apples and then going on to talk about oranges: from a statement about the nature of the church which claims not to be related to a priestly caste to describing that caste (by whatever term).

What we see, therefore, is that for all that the Reformation — and the theology that drew its inspiration from it — sought to recover a biblical and primitive Christian understanding of priesthood, in so doing it was overwhelmed by a post-Cyprian sense of what priesthood might mean in relation to church leadership and order. Even in making the case in the negative, it failed to develop a concept of priesthood freed from the sense that priesthood was related to the offices, leadership and governance of church: this simply transferred from one

⁶⁷ Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 81.

section to either another or the whole. What is needed, therefore, is a recovery of a positive sense of the church's priesthood, arising from the biblical and early Christian witness: what does it mean for *the church* to be a priesthood? What is the positive, theological content of this without immediately being drawn into questions of ecclesiastical polity? As Hans Küng puts it:

... the phrase 'priesthood of all believers' can all too easily remain a negative slogan — even and indeed precisely in Protestant theology — in order to reject the idea of priestly representation and mediation. This may well be a justified reaction to centuries of clericalism in theology and in practice. But it is essential that the *positive* significance of the priesthood of all believers is realized; the positive authorization and obligation must be recognized *and* practised ... Hence we must ask what the *concrete content* of this priesthood of all believers really is.⁶⁸

Unfortunately, this article has itself had to make so much of this case that it may have been hoist by its own petard. However, finally, laying aside the secondary concerns of polity, what are the primary theological implications of this teaching for the nature of the church?

4. The Priesthood of the Church

The church is the body of Christ, as it is created such by the event of the Holy Spirit in the time between the ascension and the *eschaton*. The church's priesthood arises, therefore, simply from its status as the body of Christ: the priesthood of the church exists only as the whole body together is made one through an act of the Spirit of God. The instincts of T. W. Manson on this matter seem correct. He writes: 'If we want to have right conceptions of the Church, what it is, and what it has to do here and now, there is one way and one way only by

⁶⁸ Küng, *The Church*, 372; albeit even this claim and its subsequent discussion comes within Küng's chapter on 'The Offices of the Church'.

which we can get them, and that is by considering Jesus of Nazareth'.⁶⁹ The clue to the priesthood of the church, therefore, stems from the person and work of Jesus. The church's priesthood is nothing other than his, as we participate in it in the present. As we have established in this article, Christ's priesthood is an *Urpriestertum*: his priesthood is one which, following from its analogous form in Melchizedek, is a primal priesthood which the Aaronic priesthood merely mirrors. To understand what it means to speak of the priesthood of the church, therefore, we should examine the various motifs that we identified in relation to the biblical and primitive Christian understanding of priesthood, and point to what this might mean for the identity and nature of the church. We must realise in this that there is a clear structural difference between the church's priesthood and that of Christ. While Christ is a priest *forever*, the church is a priesthood only as it participates in this essential identity of Christ. As J. A. T. Robinson puts it:

All that is said of the ministry in the New Testament is said not of individuals nor of some apostolic college or 'essential ministry' but of the whole Body, whatever the differentiation of function within it. This follows because the whole life of Christ is given to the Church to be possessed *in solidum*: the Spirit, the New Life, the Priesthood, everything, belongs to each as it belongs to all. In Pauline language this is expressed by saying that Christ's life is now lived and given 'Bodywise' (*somatikos*), not individually but corporately ...⁷⁰

The church's priesthood comes only from being a 'people who belong to our God'; from being stones in the temple; from being the body of Christ. Thus, Christ's priesthood is absolute and a priesthood by nature; the church's priesthood is such only as it corporately

⁶⁹ Manson, *Priesthood and Ministry*, 14.

⁷⁰ J. A. T. Robinson, 'Kingdom, Church and Ministry' in Kenneth M. Carey (ed.), *The Historic Episcopate: In the Fullness of the Church* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1960).

participates in this essential identity of Christ. How, then, are we to describe this priesthood of the church? Let us take our cues from the motifs we identified in scripture and earliest Christian theology.

Firstly, the priesthood of the church has to do, as in the preoccupation of the earliest Christian accounts with the term, with *unity*. This is a theme that is clear in the *locus classicus* of 1 Pet. 2, in which the priesthood exists through each member being built into a ‘spiritual house’. So, the author of 1 Pet. writes: ‘like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (1 Pet. 2:5). The point of the priesthood of the church is not the so-called priesthood of individuals in terms of their status or standing in the leadership of the community; this is not the sort of priest that Jesus was. It concerns, rather, the unity and singularity of the church as a ‘race’ to use the Petrine language. Priesthood is a powerful way to express this, since one cannot be a priest for oneself. A nation or race of priests is a nation which is united through its inner structural ordering to God *and* to other people. Priesthood requires not only relationality with God but also relationality with other humans; in a nation of priests, priesthood is the very form of sociality that creates the community as a community which ministers God to each other and each other to God. This radically undermines an over-emphasis on individualism since a mutual giving and receiving of the economy of God for the sake of the other creates an intensive and dynamic form of *abductive socio-poesis* (*abductive* in the sense that the Spirit brings about mutual attraction to God and others for the believer, and *socio-poesitic* in terms of the generation and shaping of relationships grounded in the divine presence and activity of the Holy Spirit).⁷¹ One could say that part of the saving activity of God is to make us a people: ‘Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s

⁷¹ Daniel Hardy, *Wording a Radiance: Parting Conversations about God and the Church*, ed. David Ford (London: SCM, 2010), 48ff.

people' is the call of 1 Peter 2:10. Creation of community, therefore, comes from the activity of God's making us into one people. *Socio-poesis* is not a claim about the social theory of a group which becomes the church; it is the claim that sociality comes only from God through the activity of the Holy Spirit in the event of the church.⁷² Furthermore, relationship to God for the individual exists only in the form and pattern of the community: since the relationship to God which each person has exists only in the context of a community of priesthood. Thus, relationship with God exists within an infrastructure of mutual ministering of God to others and receiving the ministry of God from others. In Hardy's words: 'human and human-divine community are mutually necessary.'⁷³ It is for this reason that the two greatest commandments exist structurally so closely together: to love God and to love neighbour is the very priestliness of the church.

It is in this way that we are to understand the second motif of mediation and intercession. The individual exists in relation to God only as mediated and interceded for by the community; and an individual in the church cannot exist within the church except by the act of the Spirit that orientates her outside of herself in relation to God and the other members of the community. The direct intensity of God exists, for members of the church, only through the mediation and intercession of others: we are not called to (and indeed cannot) face the glory and holiness of God alone: this divine intensity is mediated to the believer through extensity of the community, and it is to the extensity of the community that is presented and interceded for in relation to the intensity of God's life. Another way to put this is to say that only in the body of Christ can we face God. This is why worship in the Christian church is corporate, and the way in which the third motif of oblation should be understood. In worship, the

⁷² Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, DBWE 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 139.

⁷³ Hardy, 'Created and Redeemed Sociality', *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 38.

intensive presence of God is known in the coming together of the two or three in the name of Christ. The presence of God invoked in oblation is borne by the whole community, whose worship is formed by the active and dynamic ministry of the worship of God, to God and one another. In this way, we are also to understand intercessory prayer as we worship: the church bears one another before God, and lifts the concerns, needs and petitions of the whole people; we carry one another's burdens in the extensity of human existence and present them before the intensive presence of the Lord. In this way, we exist as living stones which allow ourselves to be built within the temple, to use the Petrine image.

It is necessary to be reminded, fourth, however, that the priesthood of Christ is not an Aaronic priesthood but one which both precedes the Aaronic priesthood and succeeds it: Christ is a priest *forever* after the order of Melchizedek. In this way, his priestliness is a more universalized priestliness than a priestliness only to and for the community. The church's dynamic *socio-poiesis* and mediation is one which exists in a double-fold manner. It exists internal to the community only so that the community itself can be structurally ordered at the level of community to exist for the sake of God and the other — in this way, for God and the world in the broadest sense. In Robinson's words:

In the Old Testament the priesthood ... was to do for the people what the people as a whole could not do ... In the New Testament the whole people of God is called to the priesthood — the priesthood of Christ. It is called to share his priesthood to the world, mediating his atoning and reconciling work.⁷⁴

That the church is a priesthood means not only that its internal ontology is one which is structured on God and on the world, but also that its relational engagement to those outside of its walls will be one of mediation and intercession, and of praise; indeed, without that relation

⁷⁴ J. A. T. Robinson, *On Being the Church in the World* (London: Pelikan, 1960), 97.

the church ceases to be the very thing to which it is called — a priesthood — since it is a *nation of priests within the world*. The church, thus, does not and cannot exist for itself, even in terms of its own internal sociality; but exists only in relation to the world for which it is a priestly nation. We may say, therefore, that the church worships God on behalf of the world which also exists as a creation of the Lord: the church's ministry is a ministry on behalf of all creation in offering praise and thanks to God. Furthermore, the church intercedes and mediates on behalf of the world — bringing the concerns of the world to God in faithful prayerfulness, and bringing the concerns of God to the world in proclamation. We see this existence of the church as it is structurally ordered to operate outside of itself in the event of its foundation at Pentecost.⁷⁵ The disciples move with the coming of the Spirit from forming a community orientated on itself and its own practices in praise and prayer to one whose *socio-poesis* transcends the bounds of the community, as it seeks to draw others abductively into its action of mediation for the world.⁷⁶ In other words, the priesthood of the church is one which protects the church from any inwards focused communitarian self-understanding or self-expression. The reputed words of Temple are true: 'The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members.' We might suggest, therefore, that the most intensive form of the priesthood of the church exists not at its centre or within its own communitarian structures, but at its fringes — in those areas in which its *socio-poesis* reaches out and attracts those around it in the world, drawing in and incorporating (in the strictest sense of the word) those outside the priestly community who are possessed by the *cor incurvatus in se* into the community of priesthood in which the heart

⁷⁵ See my discussion of this: *Theology against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), ch. 6.

⁷⁶ Hardy, *Wording*, 53-4.

is opened by the Spirit to be simultaneously attracted (abducted) to both God and others. As Barth asserts:

The enlightening power of the Holy Spirit draws and impels and presses beyond its being as such, beyond all the reception and experience of its members, beyond all that is promised to them personally. And only as it follows this drawing and impelling is it the real community of Jesus Christ.⁷⁷

It is this outward orientation towards those outside of the church that is the true intensity of the church's priestliness as it seeks to be a community of attraction into the true *socio-poesis* that God creates and recreates.

This activity of existence for the sake of the world is the basis for the fifth motif of priesthood — witness. The church's role is to witness to God's covenant with creation in Jesus Christ. It tells of a reality that is already present, and into which the whole of creation is to be drawn. In doing this, it participates in the activity of Christ's own witness, since in 'Jesus Christ God has made Himself the witness of the truth of the atonement.'⁷⁸ In this way, the church participates in the witness of one priest of God, Jesus Christ. As a body, the church is, therefore, a sign of the sign, and in this identity, it bears witness to the reality of God in Jesus Christ. As Bonhoeffer argues:

... the space of the church is the place where witness is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ. . . . The space of the church is not there in order to fight with

⁷⁷CD IV/1, 764.

⁷⁸ CD IV/1, 142.

the world for a piece of territory, but precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world, namely the world that is loved and reconciled by God.⁷⁹

The church as a priesthood witnesses to the covenant of God with creation. Just as the priests of Israel pointed to the mercy and forgiveness of God for the people of Israel, the church as a priesthood witnesses to the mercy and forgiveness of God for the whole world. Indeed, why is the church — according to 1 Peter 2 — chosen to be a priesthood? The purpose for this calling and this priestly nation is ‘in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (v. 9b). Part of the work of mediation to the world and the divine activity of *socio-poesis* is to witness to the reconciliation of all creation in Christ.

In this priestly activity of existing for and witnessing to the world comes the sixth aspect of the priesthood of the church — the activity of blessing and of offering and enacting God’s peace (*shalom*). This Aaronic activity is universalized in the priesthood of Christ, and is focused not only on the particular people of God, but also on the whole world. The church is called to bless the world, and to offer peace to the world. The role of the priest is not to accuse or condemn the people before God,⁸⁰ but to intercede to God on their behalf and to offer God’s blessing. This order exists not only internal to the nation of priests, but exists in relation to the people for whom this new priesthood of the church exists — the whole world. To be a royal priesthood involves working for peace, for the full *shalom* and blessing of God.⁸¹ This aspect of priesthood clearly involves being a body that will bless creation, and

⁷⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 63.

⁸⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, DBWE 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 37-8.

⁸¹ *Shalom* means more than peace as the simple avoidance of conflict. *Shalom* involves prosperity, completeness, health and wellness.

that sees itself as existing for the benefit of creation. Furthermore, this is not simply in a spiritual sense only (as if we could separate such things); there is a political component to this calling to witness as well. The church not only embodies a different polity as it is created by the Spirit into a unity of sociality; the church also witnesses of a different polity to the world — the polity of mutual priesthood, of existence for one another and for God, and of peace.⁸² In this way, it is significant that the language utilized in 1 Peter 2 speaks of the church in terms of a ‘nation’,⁸³ and in terms of exile and alienation. What is offered here by this priesthood is a different form of polity, a form which does not stand in violent rejection of, or opposition to, the ‘secular’ state but which offers an alternative ordering of polity not orientated on the power found in governance of the other, but in the *socio-poesis* of the church’s internal and external ordering — the polity of a nation which does not set its boundaries against other nations, but for other nations.⁸⁴

⁸² Much has been written on the nature of the church’s different polity and its witness to the world. See, for example, John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); and Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

⁸³ Cf. Exod. 19:6.

⁸⁴ There is much to be said about this in relation to the rest of this chapter. Over and against the relations of power and hierarchy which are structured relationally for the purpose of self-preservation, the Christian church is told: ‘Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor. Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh’ (vv. 17-18). In our social context, such an order seems to challenge our democratic and egalitarian assumptions. It is not the purpose of this paper to concur with the oppression of any people or peoples. Rather, the point here is that we are to live for others even despite of them – in a similar manner to the meaning of loving enemies and praying for those who persecute us. The deep challenge of this is difficult to imagine, but the call of Christ functions to call us to a higher and more difficult path.

The seventh and eighth motifs of priesthood are somewhat more challenging to conceive of in relation to the church: sacrifice and the bearing of sin are for the Christian acts of God which are completed once and for all on the cross by and in Jesus Christ. However, the early church's notion of sacrifice was not one which sought to add anything to or even to repeat the unique saving event of Christ. It was, instead, related generally to acts of martyrdom that expressed the discipleship of the believer and the call to the church to 'take up thy cross and follow me'. To be prepared to sacrifice everything that one has is an expression of ultimate existence for the other: existence for God in faithfulness to the dominical command, and in witness bearing to the world of the true lordship of Jesus Christ. The sacrificial component of the church, therefore, is not an expression of an ongoing expiatory sacrifice to God, but a participation in the wounded and broken body of Christ,⁸⁵ and — as in the OT's understanding of what happens in sacrifice — a witness in that to the world: we do well to remember that martyrdom means 'witness'; as in the OT, sacrifice and witness are one in a priestly context. In this way, sacrifice is the most intensive enactment available in this life of *socio-poiesis* (of living for the other, even to the point of dying to witness to the other). In sacrifice, in martyrdom, we see an expression of existence which is completely priestly: existence not for one's self but for the sake of the other, both *intra* and *extra muros ecclesiae*. All other sacrifices (of time, money, status, power, and so forth), are reflections of this ultimate sacrifice: they are acts which are not structured upon the self, but upon God, the other and the world — upon the very others that priesthood requires and demands.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Cf. Col. 1:24.

⁸⁶ On the implications of language of sacrifice for feminist theology, the reader is directed to Esther McIntosh, 'The Concept of Sacrifice: A Reconsideration of the Feminist Critique', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1:2 (2007), 210-229.

The motif of sin-bearing, which the Aaronic priesthood undertook, might also challenge notions of the final and complete expiatory work of Christ. However, the identity of the church as priestly sin-bearer might, too, find content in relation to the conception of *socio-poesis* forwarded here, and indeed may be a greater sacrificial enactment than martyrdom. In the Aaronic priesthood, the activity of sin bearing was one undertaken on behalf of the people of God. The internal *socio-poesis* of the church determines that this activity of confession and sin-bearing on behalf of others remains within the priestly identity and activity of the church. Prioritizing community over self and recognizing the relationality of the individuals to each other determines that we recognize the social nature of sin, and our own being bound up in the sins of others. As Bonhoeffer puts it: ‘all Christians must be aware of having brought sin into the world, and thus aware of being bound together with the whole of humanity in sin, aware of having the sins of humanity on their conscience.’⁸⁷ In original sin, we are bound together in the sinfulness of each other: the cancerous nature of sinful acts determines that our sin exists in a nexus of perverted sociality. The church’s prayer is, as instructed by Christ, therefore, not ‘forgive me my trespasses’ but ‘forgive *us our* trespasses, as *we* forgive them that trespass against *us*’. This corporate nature of confession and forgiveness is important. But the church does not only seek to bear the sin of its own members: as a priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, the church undertakes a role of confessing before God the sins of the world and being prepared to plead to God that we receive the judgment which should be ordered towards the world of which we are inescapably a part and of which we cannot wash our hands like Pilate. This mirrors Moses’ actions in pleading to God on behalf of the people (Exodus 32:8), and universalizes this action for the whole *kosmos*. Indeed, as Lindbeck points out, this is an activity that can only be undertaken by the Christian church: outside of the church (the community of confession and absolution), the whole concept of sin and

⁸⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Communio Sanctorum*, 287.

forgiveness is not possible.⁸⁸ The task of the church is, therefore, to bear the sin of the world before God. This point is made powerfully by Bonhoeffer:

The church is today the community of people who, grasped by the power of Christ's grace, acknowledge, confess, and take upon themselves not only their personal sins, but also the Western world's falling away from Jesus Christ as toward Jesus Christ ... With this confession the whole guilt of the world falls on the church, on Christians, and because here it is confessed and not denied, the possibility of forgiveness is opened...⁸⁹

This may well be the church's ultimate sacrificial identity as it seeks to witness of Jesus Christ, the sign of God's covenant with creation, to the world.

5. In Place of a Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has sought only to make the most initial of beginnings, and has pointed in only the most telegrammatic ways to the way in which the concept of priesthood needs to be rethought within Christian theology. Through biblical and historical reflection, the article has endeavoured to consider the category of 'priest' as corporate for the Christian church. Reclaiming what it means for the church to be a priesthood, I have sought to analyse the church's priesthood in relation to motifs identified with the Aaronic priesthood, and in relation to Christ's priesthood and earliest Christian conceptions of the priesthood. In offering this account it has been necessary for me to have to mount the negative case in offering a polemic against the polemical nature of the priesthood of all believers in order to move from

⁸⁸ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 59.

⁸⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 135-6.

considerations of priesthood within Christian theology which are (either fully or residually) really accounts of church polity to speech of a theological order about the *church* as priesthood. In doing this, this article seeks more than anything to point towards the necessity of further conversation and theological engagement with what it means for the church to be a priesthood, and to lay the historical and biblical foundations that might legitimize such further investigation. Such investigation is an area in which there is the potential, it seems, for vast fruit to be born within theological accounts of the nature of the church.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ In this way, this article seeks to offer some of the historical contextualization for my ongoing constructive work in ecclesiology. The conclusions this essay bear are to be worked out fully in relation to constructive ecclesiology in my forthcoming three volume ecclesiology (to be published by Baker Academic Press), especially in relation to volume 1 (provisionally entitled): *The Priestly Catholicity of the Church*.