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W. Arndt

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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A Royal Priesthood, 1 Pet. 2:9

By W. ARNDT

If it were not a fact with which we have been familiar since childhood days, we should be amazed to see that the Christian Church began its course without an official class of priests. The opening chapters of Acts, which report the founding of the Church, give the Apostles a prominent place in the early stages. These men served as pastors and teachers; at first the duties of almoners were incumbent on them, too. Hence the Church had leadership, but it did not have priests. The Apostles did not lay claim to such a status. In Jerusalem and Palestine in general this feature was not particularly noticeable, because the followers of Jesus did not withdraw at once from the Jewish worship but, on the contrary, were very zealous in observing the ancestral rites and ceremonies which were conducted by the priests in the Temple. They would have denied being without the service of priests. As Acts 21 conclusively shows, this relationship was still maintained in a period not far from the catastrophe which was to bring complete ruin upon unhappy Jerusalem and its Temple. Undoubtedly the Christians living in that city joined in the Temple services till they finally on the eve of the Roman siege, in obedience to the warnings of Christ, fled and found a place of refuge in Pella, beyond the Jordan.

In the Gentile world outside of Palestine, however, the absence of priests in the Christian Church must have attracted attention. The heathen saw that the Christian churches had elders, likewise called bishops (overseers), but if one looked

for priests, there was disappointment. The pagan religions had priests. When one thinks of the Greeks, the case of the priest of Jupiter, mentioned Acts 14 in the story of the experiences of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra, readily comes to mind. Priests played an important role in the religious life of the Hellenic world. Similarly the Romans had their priests; the emperors had the title of *pontifex maximus*. The Egyptians, as we know from ancient history, had priests who superintended and conducted the religious worship. How strange it must have seemed to an interested observer that the new religion, that of Christ, was not provided with religious functionaries of this nature!

It may be rejoined that my presentation is not quite adequate, that Christ is the High Priest of the Christian religion, and that hence it is not correct to speak of Christianity as being without priests. In reply I, of course, grant at once that Christ is our divine High Priest. But the terminology which ascribes high-priestly status and honors to Christ was not in vogue at first; the documents that describe the founding of the Church do not say that Jesus was preached as the High Priest to people that gathered to hear the Apostles. Christ is called Messiah, King, Savior, but not High Priest. It is only when we come to the Epistle to the Hebrews that Jesus is given this title. The term, as we all see, is intended to describe the work of Jesus; it was used by the Holy Spirit for that very purpose. But, humanly speaking, it was not needed; the truth to be conveyed can be expressed by other terms, too. But the priestly office held by our blessed Lord is irrelevant in this discussion. We are here concerned with what the observer saw in the visible Church.

Now, however, we come to a remarkable observation. While the Christians had no priests, the truth is that in the inspired Scriptures every Christian is called a priest. We think of the well-known title which Peter applies to the Christians collectively, "a royal priesthood," βασιλείον ιεράτευμα, 1 Pet. 2:9. This terminology had not been employed in the speeches of Peter recorded in the Book of Acts nor in the Letters of St. Paul, although a hint at the concept is found, for instance, Rom. 12:1 ("present your bodies a living sacrifice").

1. The expression "a royal priesthood" comes before us in a context in which a similar phrase occurs — "a holy priest-

hood," used with respect to Christians, 1 Pet. 2:5. Christ is spoken of there as "a living Stone rejected by men, but elect, precious with God"; and the Christians are admonished: "You, too, as living stones, build yourselves up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are well pleasing to God through Jesus Christ." Peter here, as it were, prepares the readers for the term which he will employ soon, "royal priesthood." After he has spoken of the Old Testament Scripture passage in which Jesus is called the elect, precious Cornerstone (Is. 28:16), trust in whom will put no one to shame, and after he has remarked about those who reject Christ and to whom our Lord becomes a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, he says, v. 9: "You are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for personal possession, in order to proclaim the grand qualities of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

2. We all notice the contrast which is here introduced. Opposite the unbelieving world, hurrying to its dark destiny, the Christians are placed. Their blessed state and high privileges are described. Peter engages in a burst of inspired eloquence, heaping up expressions in a very effective way. The true dignity of the Christians is the burden of his statement. Just as in the first chapter he had spoken of the glorious hope which we possess as followers of Jesus Christ, so here he dwells on the prerogatives and the exalted position which pertain to us who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. In hours of darkness, when a feeling of utter frustration threatens to overwhelm us, when our apparent insignificance in contrast to the high stations often attained by children of this world becomes painfully evident, this passage of Peter should be read and pondered.

3. It is universally recognized that we are here dealing with Old Testament terms. Findlay (*Portrait of Peter*, p. 174) says correctly: "Peter piles up one on the other great Old Testament titles of Israel and applies them to his readers." It is from various Old Testament passages that the individual terms are taken. Peter employs the Septuagint translation. Ex. 19:5 f. is the chief passage. In v. 5 occurs the term λαός περιούσιος, and in v. 6 we find the words βασίλειον ἱεράτευμα and ἔθνος ἅγιον. The term γένος ἐκλεκτόν we find Is. 43:20.

A passage in which three of the terms (people for possession, royal priesthood, holy nation) appear is Ex. 23:20 (LXX).

4. The expression "royal priesthood" seems simple enough, and yet it has been interpreted in several different ways. It will be best to look at it first from the lexicographical side. Βασιλειος, royal, is slightly different from βασιλικός, which likewise can be translated "royal." Chamberlain (*Exegetical Grammar of the N. T.*, p. 13) reminds us that adjectives ending in ιος express the idea of possession, while those that end in ικος denote ability or fitness. We shall see that this distinction is helpful in the attempt to interpret our expression.

5. The term ἱεράτευμα likewise requires a little lexicographical discussion. It is a collective term, signifying a class or group of priests. We must not overlook that the English word "priesthood" may designate the office as well as the people who hold the office. Evidently the latter is the meaning here. The German language differentiates between the two meanings in the terms *Priestertum* and *Priesterschaft*. Luther's translation would have been more accurate if he had chosen the latter word. For the office of priest the New Testament in Luke 1:9 uses the word ἱερατεία.

6. That there is a difference of opinion on our expression between exegetes is due to the interpretation given the word "royal." All are agreed that the Christians are called priests or a class of priests. Here there is no difficulty. But how must the adjective "royal" be understood?

7. We shall in the first place catalog the chief explanations. Findlay (l. c.) paraphrases "priesthood in the service of a king." He takes the adjective as signifying "being the property of a king." Stoeckhardt and many other exegetes take the expression to mean "kings and priests." They point to the Old Testament phrase (Ex. 19:6) מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים (a kingdom of priests), which in the Septuagint is translated "royal priesthood." According to their view Peter wishes to ascribe a dual status to the Christians, that of kings and that of priests. Selwyn in his very recent commentary on First Peter holds that βασιλειον is a noun and that hence we are here dealing with a double term, Peter saying to the Christians, "You are a kingdom, a priesthood." De Wette explains the expression as meaning "a priesthood which is sovereign, which possesses freedom, and is subject to no one except God."

8. One thing can be stated here with a good deal of satisfaction. Of the various interpretations listed above there is not a single one that offends against the *analogia fidei*; from the point of view of dogmatic correctness any one of them could be chosen. But, of course, that does not mean that all of them correctly give the meaning of Peter. *Sensus literalis unus est* — the intended sense is but one.

9. The interpretation of Selwyn I cannot accept. He tries to fortify his interpretation by three arguments: (1) In 2 Macc. 2:17 βασιλειον is a noun and it is found side by side with ιεράτευμα. We are justified, says Selwyn, in finding here the explanation, current among the postexilic Jews, of the Ex. 19:6 phrase in question (but he fails to evaluate properly the fact that in the 2 Macc. 2 passage the two words are joined by "and"); (2) The position of βασιλειον before ιεράτευμα, instead of following it, suggests that the word is not an adjective; in other pairs of words found in 1 Pet. 2:9 one is an adjective, and the adjective always follows the noun (but this cannot be stressed; Peter would be influenced by the relative position of the words in Ex. 19:6; and certainly the rhythm of the passage would be destroyed if here suddenly in utter staccato style two unconnected nouns appeared instead of a noun plus an adjective); (3) The meaning "kingdom" seems to agree with, and to be the counterpart of, οίκος πνευματικός, v. 5 (but surely this is a far-fetched argument; who would think of the word "kingdom" as being an echo of the phrase "spiritual house"?).

10. The explanation of Stoeckhardt and others that Peter here assigns a double status to Christians, that of kings and priests, sets forth a truth that is gloriously expressed in the words of the new song recorded Rev. 5:10, addressed to the Lamb on the throne: "Thou hast made them kings ["kingdom" in the Nestle text] and priests to our God, and they shall reign upon earth." A comforting Scripture teaching is there brought before us. But when a person thinks of the Hebrew original meaning literally, as stated before, a kingdom of priests, the first thought arising in one hardly is that the expression signifies "kings and priests." One will rather say that a kingdom is spoken of the subjects in which are priests. The Greek words "royal class of priests" might, it is true, legitimately express the double idea of kings and priests,

but in view of the Hebrew original this explanation does not suggest itself naturally and readily.

11. De Wette's view is merely a variant of the one just examined. The adjective is taken as denoting that the persons spoken of are kings and as such possess sovereignty and freedom. The same objection applies here as in reference to the preceding explanation.

12. There remains the view adopted by Findlay, and I think a calm examination will give it the preference. "A priesthood in the service of a king" — that is certainly a possible paraphrase of the expression. It agrees with the meaning of βασιλειον, the adjective denoting possession: the priesthood in question belongs to Christ, the exalted Lord. As a royal army is an army belonging to a king, so a royal priesthood is a class of priests that owes allegiance to a king, in this case to Christ, the Son of God, true God Himself. And, let me repeat, that, after all, is the idea which the Old Testament phrase "a kingdom of priests" suggests. A kingdom comes before us, it consists of subjects, and all of them are priests. This view is sponsored in Meyer's commentary and other works.

It will be of interest to the reader to see the explanation of Von Soden in his commentary. He says the term "royal" is applied to the New Testament priesthood, "weil es dem Koenig der Erde dient und dadurch an dessen Koenigswuerde teil hat." If the second thought is regarded as resulting from the first, being a corollary, as it were, we can give it our full endorsement. Bigg, in his commentary, I hold, is right when he safeguards the meaning of the word "royal," remarking that this epithet belongs to the priesthood "not because the priests are themselves kings and shall reign upon earth (as in the Apocalypse)." The Christians are kings; but that truth is not expressed here.

13. Do we sufficiently see what it means that we are said to be priests? In the Old Testament the priests served before God in the tabernacle and the Temple; they had the right to enter the holy place; and one of them, the high priest, although only once a year, went into the Holy of Holies. Their relationship with God was more intimate and direct than that of the ordinary people. The priest represented Israel at the throne of mercy. In the New Testament every believer has

the privilege of appearing directly before God and rendering Him holy service; no intermediary is required; with prayers, pleadings, and thanksgiving every believer, let him be ever so humble, can approach God; there is no barrier beyond which some may go, others not. The priesthood of all believers, so forcefully taught by Peter, is one of the glories of the New Covenant.

14. The high position is given Christians so that they may render service. Cf. v. 5. The priests in the Old Testament, too, were not supposed to be drones; they were to give their time to the service of Jehovah. Let no one think that the plan of God in making priests of all New Testament believers was intended to lead them into a state of inactivity and indolence. Sacrifices are to be offered up by them. The laity, as well as the clergy, is to be active in this respect. In this point there is to be no difference—all are to offer holy sacrifices. The clergymen are not a higher class; they merely hold a special office and perform a special function, that of publicly, as the representatives of the congregation, preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments.

The purpose clause which concludes v. 9 is linked to the particular appellation of the Christians under discussion as well as to the other terms—"that you should proclaim the grand qualities of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." The Christians have been made priests of God for the purposes of a holy propaganda in which the greatness and goodness of the Lord is to be exalted. The Apostle indirectly indicates one of the lines this effort may take: God has done great things for you; He has taken you out of the desert of darkness and death and brought you into the garden of life and light. Shout this from the housetops, and tell people that what He has done for you He is eager to do for others, in fact, for all.

15. We should not overlook what has been briefly adverted to before: that the term "priesthood" or "class of priests" is a collective term. The Christians are viewed as one company, one aggregation. It is the concept of the *una sancta ecclesia* which finds expression here. Wherever they are, whoever they may be, however they may rate socially, whatever their denominational connections are, if they are true believers, they belong to this royal priesthood. A group

of priests they all form together. The bond that unites them, it is true, is invisible — faith in Jesus Christ. But they are really joined together, they all have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb; in their midst stands the great High Priest, and they all are ranged about Him as His priests, acknowledged to hold the highest position that mortal man can fill.

16. It is difficult in our age, which is devoted to the exploitation of advantages belonging to the material world, to arouse enthusiasm for the status that pertains to the true disciples of Jesus Christ. The Einstein theory and the fission of the atom are regarded far more exciting. But to the person who has seen his sinfulness and who has found peace and happiness in the conviction that Jesus is his Savior the benefits that lie in the realm of the Spirit will be sweeter than honey and the honeycomb; and the knowledge that he is a priest in the temple of God will be more precious than high social distinctions, wealth, and the tawdry pleasures of this life.

17. While Luther holds the view, which I do not share, that Peter in our phrase ascribes a dual status to the Christians, his exposition so well reflects what the Scriptures in general teach on this point and withal is so powerful and comforting that I must quote a part of it. In the second edition of his sermons on First Peter (St. Louis edition, IX:1184 ff.) he says: "Priests and kings are altogether spiritual names, like Christian, saint, Church. For just as you are not called a Christian on account of possession of much money and property, but because you are built on the rock and believe in Christ, so you are not called a priest on account of a tonsure or a long robe, but because you, through Christ, have access to the Father and may pray in His name and have the assurance that your prayer will be heard. Similarly you are not a king on account of a golden crown and dominion over much land and many people, but because you, through Christ, are lord of death, sin, hell, and all creatures. For you are just as well a king as Christ is a King if you believe in Him. Now, He is not a secular King, does not wear a golden crown, does not come riding along with much show and numerous horses; but He is a King of all kings, to whom all power in heaven and on earth is given and under whose feet, as the Psalm says, all things have been placed. As He is a Lord, so I and you

are lords. What He has, I have, and you, too; for through Him we are God's children and heirs, His brothers and co-heirs, Rom. 8:17."

18. What did the Jews and pagans say when they heard this high doctrine? Those that knew the Old Testament could understand it, because it is precisely in this way that God had spoken of the true Israel in the days of the Old Testament. Alas! wrapped up as most of the Jewish contemporaries of Peter were in their ritualism, it is very doubtful that many of them properly evaluated this Apostolic appraisal of the Christian's status. To the pagans the language was utterly foreign and unintelligible; it must have sounded to them like braggadocio of an extreme type.

20. Finally a word on truths specially emphasized by our Church on the basis of 1 Pet. 2:9. The individual Christians, as priests of God, are possessors of all the spiritual privileges which God has prepared for His Church. To them belong the Word and the Sacraments, the power of the keys, that is, the power to open and close the gates of heaven and the right to call pastors and teachers. It is true, God has said that all things should be done decently and in order and that there should be the Gospel ministry. In this respect directives were given by God Himself to the Christians as to the manner in which the duties and functions of the priesthood should be carried out. But the Christian Church was not founded as an oligarchy where a few have the authority to dictate to the many nor as a sacerdotal religion in which there is a class of priests which has special spiritual privileges. All the children of God are priests, and to everyone belong the rights and privileges indicated by that term. Let us lead our people every day to find comfort, strength, and stimulation for holy service in this amazing truth.

St. Louis, Mo.

