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The Priesthood of All Believers

A Bible Study first presented at the European Protestant Assembly, Budapest 1992

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We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified (Romans 8:28-30).

THIS is a text which has been controversial among Protestants. I begin here because I believe that if we attend to it in its context, searching beyond our inherited contrary exegeses, we will be better prepared to address our theme, to affirm our identity together and discern our responsibilities towards the world beyond our Protestant conventicles.

The problem with this text for Protestantism has arisen because the followers of Calvin understood him to teach predestination on the basis of Paul's statement here, and Arminius challenged that view. The dispute was replayed in the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival in Britain, notably between Whitefield and Wesley. So I come from a Church, the Methodist Church, which values its Arminian tradition. Others of you will have roots in the Calvinist tradition. But these tensions within Christian theology were already there long before. If Augustine affirmed a doctrine of predestination, particularly in the dispute with Pelagius, the older tradition lived on in Eastern theology. In the face of the ancient world's fatalism, expressed in astrology and much pagan superstition, Christians had strongly affirmed human freewill and ethical responsibility.

But these were not the concerns of Paul. He was not trying to deduce a Christian response to a classic philosophical problem. He was trying to discern God's purpose and express Christian vocation in a world in its death throes.

Let's begin with the context. Paul reckons that the sufferings of the present time cannot bear comparison with the glory that is about to be revealed. There are many indications besides this that Paul shared the vision we find in apocalyptic literature, literature of revelation written around that time by Jews, and subsequently by Christians too. A new heaven and a new earth were to come into being, but it would be out of the fires of judgment and the destruction of the old world. Mark 13 is an example of the kind of scenario: wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes, famine, persecution, false-prophets and false-Messiahs, signs and wonders, portents in the heavens, heaven and earth passing away. These were the

tribulations or birth-pangs of the new world, and Paul in Romans 8:22 speaks of the whole creation groaning and travailing, using the Greek word for a woman in labour. What he affirms in the midst of all that is hope and expectation of redemption, trust that 'God works for good with those who love him', that they will be brought through the final cataclysm in safety, because

If God is for us, who is against us? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8: 31, 35, 37-39).

For Paul, as for others among the early Christians, the resurrection of Christ was the sign that the End-time had begun — no-one expected any resurrection prior to the Last Days when the dead would rise to face God's judgment. Now Christ was the first-born of the dead. God's final purposes were being brought to fruition. That is the context for our difficult few verses.

The context gives us one set of clues for understanding Paul's sense of destiny. For apocalyptic literature demonstrates that the seer or visionary to whom the revelation was given believed he was shown the future, already in some sense prepared in heaven, so that he could communicate insight into God's ultimate purposes. A philosophical general truth about predestination is not appropriately deduced from this, but the notion that somehow, in spite of the awfulness of it all, everything is in God's hands, certainly should.

But there is, I believe, another approach to discovering Paul's thinking. Where else do we find him using this sort of language? The first significant clue is in Galatians 1:15ff, where Paul refers to him 'who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace'. Paul identifies himself with a prophet like Jeremiah, who heard God say (1:5): 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations'; and with the Servant of God who says (Isaiah 49:1) 'The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name.' This self-understanding underlies much of what Paul says in defence of his apostleship and mission in 2 Corinthians, and in that Epistle he speaks of being conformed to the image of Christ as 'with unveiled face, we all, beholding (and/or mirroring) the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from glory to glory' (2 Corinthians 3:18). Whether he means apostles or all Christians is somewhat unclear in 2 Corinthians, but in the light of these and other passages, I suggest that the way to understand our text in Romans is to see it in terms of Paul generalising his own sense of call to every believer.

Every believer is called according to God's purpose. God's ultimate purpose is mapped out in advance, at least in general terms: the ones God intends to call for the fulfilment of that purpose are set apart, prepared in advance, known to God.

In the following chapter, Paul will spell out the peculiar and unexpected nature of God's call. Jacob instead of Esau — 'though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but *because of call . . .*' (Romans 9:11). The whole thing depends on God's mercy, not the will or effort of any human being. Even Pharaoh, unbeknown to himself, had a purpose in God's plan. And for all the agonising of chapters 9-11 we are left with the sense that Paul implicitly trusts God's purposes, probably even for those whose role in God's plan does not seem very positive or heroic, even for the 'vessels of wrath' — even for his own people the Jews, despite the fear that they are cut off . . . But in chapter 8 Paul is focusing on the particular call of each and every believer. And this is what primarily concerns us. Facing the death-throes of the old world, Paul asserts that God is at work for good in everything, particularly with respect to those who love him and are called according to his purpose. These 'called ones' like prophets and apostles he 'prepared in advance', he knew them in their mother's womb, he set them apart and consecrated them. And what is his purpose in them? That they should be conformed to the image of his Son, that after their call and their advance preparation for their destiny, they should be justified and glorified. In this way Christ will not be alone, but the first-born of many brethren. What does all this mean?

To grasp Paul's ideas we need to be aware of the argument he has been pursuing all through the Epistle up to this point. But one particular element in that argument is of primary importance. It will be found in Chapter 5. There Paul compares and contrasts Adam and Christ. To cut a long story short, the two represent different kinds of humanity: Adam is fallen humanity, subject to sin, liable to the distractions and temptations of worldly existence (or life in the flesh), while Christ is humanity as God intended it to be — made in the image of God, not dead in sin but alive to God, with the mind set not on the flesh but the spirit. Paul's argument all through is that those who are called in Christ are to be transformed, re-created so that the Law of God is written in their hearts, as Jeremiah predicted would be the case when the new covenant came. The role of the believer is to live out that destiny, to be humanity as God intended it to be, made in God's own image, glorified with God's own glory, the glory which the Son shares with the Father. Christ is not to be the only perfect human being, he is to have brothers and sisters.

And so earlier in chapter 8 Paul has spoken of those led by the Spirit of God being sons not slaves, being children of God, able to cry 'Abba, Father' and approach with confidence not fear, and 'if children, then heirs and fellow-heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.' The calling is not simply for our own redemption, not for privilege. Paul rejoices in his sufferings, and 'fills up

what is lacking in Christ's afflictions' (Col. 1:24). The language there and in this chapter of Romans suggests going through with Christ the death-throes of the old world so as to bring the new world to birth, dying with Christ to rise with him in the new creation. That is the destiny of those God has called according to his purpose.

I've been drawing out what Paul has to say about every believer. What about priesthood? Believe it or not, Paul barely ever mentions priesthood of any sort. In fact there is very little about priesthood in the New Testament. Most words connected with priestly identity or activity only appear in the narratives of Gospels and Acts to refer to Jewish priests. The exceptions are the attribution of priesthood and priestly ministry to Jesus in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which does not claim to have been written by Paul, and the following passage from I Peter:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people (I Peter 2:9-10).

Clearly the church is being addressed, and it is as a community that the church is being given the identity of God's chosen people of old. A little earlier, we read:

... like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (I Peter 2:5).

The whole community of believers is built into a spiritual temple, and the whole community has a priestly office, like the old Israel, to be a light to the nations.

Such a notion is not too far from Paul's ideas. In Romans 15 Paul speaks of being a 'minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the [priestly] service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.' He seems to suggest he has already done his work from Jerusalem to Illyricum, and is preparing to go on to Spain. This, together with many other things one picks up the more one reads Paul, suggests that he did not aim to convert every individual Gentile. Rather he concentrated on establishing a network of communities which were the first-fruits of each nation, a little nucleus or seed of the new creation, a priestly community representing each people before God.

So, for Paul and the other writers of the New Testament, the Church inherits through Christ not just the promises to Israel, but the responsibilities, to be a priestly people, representing God to the world and the world to God, a go-between, a 'pontifex' or bridge-builder. Even in Romans 8, the passage on which we have concentrated, Paul speaks of prayer and intercession and the need for the Spirit to assist our weakness: is it just prayer for the saints who struggle through those woes and tribulations? Is it

not rather that the saints, like Christ, are engaged in a struggle for the redemption of the whole world, of the whole of God's creation?

Reflecting on this exegesis, I suggest that there are three lessons for us:

(1) The Protestant emphasis on the call and responsibility of every individual believer is grounded in Paul's generalisation of his apostolic call to everyone. That is our inheritance. It gives us our identity. It is a vital truth for the whole Christian tradition.

Nor should we be tempted to rationalise away the sense of destiny that accompanies the sense of call, despite the challenges of modernity. To borrow a phrase of Paul's, I know a woman in Christ whose life, roughly between the ages of twenty and forty, was for various reasons a kind of wandering in the wilderness. Then she had what she was tempted to describe as a Damascus Road experience. She responded to what she understood as a call to ordination in the Methodist Church. Afterwards she realised that she had unconsciously followed the call of her brother Richard, who had died at the age of sixteen. That was strange enough, but then her mother told her the really extraordinary thing: She'd been pregnant with her first-born in 1939. A few months before the baby arrived, war broke out. She was depressed, and did not want to bring a child into such an awful world. She prayed. She dedicated the unborn baby in her womb, as Hannah did.

It makes me tremble, but if it happens to one it may happen to anyone. Every believer, including every member of the female sex, is called according to God's purpose. We dare not put limits on God's call. As Protestants, we must proclaim and live the tradition we have inherited, affirming the apostolic call of every Christian.

(2) The context of that calling is a world that is groaning and travailing with the agony of giving birth to a new world.

Few of us, I dare say, share Paul's apocalyptic world-view. Yet a sense of history makes one aware that there are constant little cataclysms before the great cataclysm, whatever that might turn out to be. There are deaths and resurrections, in the lives of nations, in the life of the Church, in the lives of individuals. The End may not be yet, but it is anticipated. The struggle to bring a new world to birth has already begun. Living in a *penultimate* world, between the present evil age and the new creation, seeking to become what in a sense we already are — the heirs of Christ, the image of God, humanity as humanity was meant to be, that is an ever-present tension. Augustine, as the Roman Empire entered its dying years, wrote of two cities, two political entities, with different motivations, moving through history in conflict, tension and interaction with one another, and the same struggle he saw mirrored in the Church and in the individual: the struggle between love of God and self-interest. Without subscribing wholesale to first-century apocalypticism, we can see much that rings true in Paul's perspective at various points in history, including our own.

Perhaps above all, at this moment of European history, fifty years on

from the last great European War, we sense ourselves in the midst of one of those moments of struggle when something new is ready to be born. That is the context of our calling. What then is our calling in this situation? Surely not simply to reaffirm our tradition and our identity.

The question must arise what is to be our political role in this new era? As Protestants, we may not perhaps yearn for the old Christendom, as some do it seems, but let us not forget that at the Reformation, there was a search for something similar, a theocracy, a bonding of church and state. Protestantism is not just about the redemption of pious individuals in their privileged spiritual enclaves. It is about a calling which has political consequences because the context is a world struggling under God to bring a new creation into being according to God's purposes.

I believe the notion of believers being called into a priestly community tells us much about what that calling might involve — and it is worth stressing that the priesthood belongs in the New Testament not to individual believers, but to the community, the people of God.

The Old Testament allows us glimpses into the struggle of God's people to realise its priestly vocation, to express in social reality the gracious purpose of God, his Kingdom of justice and peace. Their story is of an on-going process of adaptation to new conditions: there is no point at which utopia is achieved, but journeys into exile and return, new challenges — dynamic struggle rather than static perfection. And the story emerges through a kind of 'checks-and-balances' interaction between persons called to exercise different roles: kings, prophets, priests, psalmists and poets, even secretaries with education and access to international wisdom and knowledge. The body is made up of many members whose diverse roles all make a contribution to a task which Isaiah suggests is not just for themselves, their own salvation or fulfilment, but rather to be a light for the nations.

As we have seen, I Peter tells Christians that they have been adopted into this inheritance. We could learn much from this Epistle about the ambivalence of the Church towards the powers that be, being submissive yet free because ultimate loyalty lies with the commonwealth of God not the state, maintaining common human decency, with obedience, integrity and goodness, avoiding criminality, yet being prepared to stand up for Christ when the chips are down. And it is this Epistle which insists that the calling to priesthood is not for privilege but for responsibility, being the go-between between God and his world, 'declaring the wonderful deeds of the one who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.'

More than ever before in world history the Church is dispersed throughout the international body politic. We might use a modern parable, seeing the church as a kind of central nervous system, a world-wide network called to transmit messages, both vertically and horizontally — feeling the pain and the judgment, charged with the often hidden duty of intercession and service, potentially the secret channel of God's involvement in the world, the priestly 'go-between'. The role is appropriate even for churches feeling small and weak.

In exercising this priestly function, the Christian community will evidence the compassion of the priest for the people, for we are ourselves far from perfect. The priest does not offer sacrifice and prayer for his own sins alone, however, but for the sins of the people. We have a responsibility for the body politic, and we need to find our public role in the new Europe that is emerging.

(3) My third and final point arises directly out of my second. Every believer is called into a priestly community. I've characterised that community as a network permeating modern society throughout the world, internationally. That network depends on communication and mutual sharing. It demands ecumenism, for the different streams of Christian discipleship are present in different places in different ways. We cannot fulfil our vocation or enter into our destiny if we do not have fellowship with other parts of the Body of Christ, if we do not recognise our brothers and sisters who also help to ensure that Christ is not alone but the first-born among many brethren. That means ecumenical relations with Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic church and the burgeoning Pentecostal communities.

Yes, Protestant identity was forged in protest — protest against a dominant and élite priesthood, an inward-looking clerical order that did not point beyond itself but hugged privilege, authority and power to itself. But perhaps our tradition has too easily produced another kind of élite inward-looking priesthood, a priesthood of individual believers who are tempted to forget their priestly calling to take responsibility for the world, and an élite of the redeemed that only thinks of persuading others to join their élite group. There is a kind of democracy in church and world which oppresses individuals with the demand to participate. There is another kind of democracy in which some are called to be servants, to shoulder responsibility on behalf of others, as the representatives of a wider less-committed public. Could it not be that the traditions of mediating priesthood in the Old Testament and in the older streams of Christianity, against which we Protestants protested, have something to offer as together we seek to discover what the role of the Church might be in the new order which is emerging? Suppose that together we Christian communities represent the nations to God and God to the nations?

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purposes. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.