

Holy and Royal: A Priesthood of Service and Sanctification in 1 Peter

Introduction

This paper sets out to examine the New Testament background to the doctrine, so important to the Protestant tradition, of the 'priesthood of all believers'. To attempt to consider all parts of the New Testament from which this doctrine may be drawn is clearly beyond the scope of one paper, so I have chosen to focus on just one – 1 Peter 2. I shall look primarily at verse 9 – the believing community as a *basileion hierateuma* ('royal priesthood'). It would be impossible, however, to consider this concept without reference to verse 5 – the church as a *hierateuma hagion* ('holy priesthood') – although there is not space here to do it justice or to give it more than very brief and inadequate treatment.

I shall argue that priesthood, while firstly and most importantly serving God, must also be service of the community within which it operates. Hence, any invocation of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers which takes seriously 1 Peter and the contexts within which it was written, received and understood, should focus not only on the individual's or church's relationship with God, but also, crucially, on mission and on the relationship of the church with the world. The church is a dispersed priesthood, serving God for the sanctification of an unholy world. It offers intercession on behalf of that world, and as the representative of the world, offers 'spiritual sacrifice'; it lives a life governed not by its own convenience or wishes, but a pure and holy life, which will bring the world to glorify God. Of course, the relationship of the Christian and the Christian community with God is vitally important; indeed, it is at the heart of the priestly vocation. However, this is not an inward-focused relationship; rather, it is precisely this special relationship with God which gives the church its mission of service in the world: 'To serve the present age, our calling to fulfil'.

Some Methodist Musings

"The Methodist Church holds the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class." So states the *Deed of Union* of the British Methodist Church. This is reflected upon in *Called to Love and Praise*, the British Methodist Conference statement on the Church: "Ordination thus does not confer any special priestly powers on the minister, who is neither more nor less a priest ... than any other Christian."¹ This document, having recalled that Christ is the only mediator and High Priest, states that in the New Testament "the whole Church was 'priestly', continuing the ministry of Israel and her Messiah (1 Peter 2:9)."² This emphasis is, of course, far from unique to Methodism, and can be found to a degree even in denominations where certain ordained officers *are* called 'priests'. Much Anglican reflection on the subject of priesthood, even where it is written for the benefit and development of the ordained clergy, begins with the priesthood of Christ, moves from there to the priestly character

¹ *Called to Love and Praise*, 1999, 4.5.11 (p.46)

² *Ibid*, 4.5.2 (p.44)

of the Church, and finally (albeit in most detail) considers the rôle of the ordained 'Priest'.³

The accepted Reformation view of the priesthood of all believers is that all baptised believers are priestly, by virtue of their baptism, or of their faith, confirmed by baptism.⁴ Thus, the doctrine affirms each believer's capacity to engage with God in prayer, to receive absolution from God and to discern God's will, all without the need for a priestly intermediary. The missiological dimension for which I am arguing – that the doctrine should also envisage the body of believers as intermediaries between God and an unbelieving world – may be resisted, as a violation of the more individual aspect. However, I believe it to be a fundamentally important element of the church's biblically ordained priestly task that it should be not only a body of 'priests' (as Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6 may admittedly suggest), each individually able to embody the priestly nature, but also a 'priesthood', with a corporate identity and shared task in relation to the world.

Perhaps a good example of this balance is the contrast between the relatively introspective pursuit of holiness by the Wesleys during their time in the Holy Club at Oxford, and the later concern for 'scriptural holiness' being spread throughout the land. One appears on the surface to be primarily focussed on the sanctification Club members' own souls, while the other is more mission-oriented and concerned with the sanctification of the nation. The former is not invalid; self-examination and concern for one's own holiness are among the crucial responsibilities of a priest. But without the latter, it becomes the purity and holiness of a hermitage, rather than of a priesthood.

1 Peter: General Issues

One of the primary contextual questions which has concerned students of the first Epistle of Peter is of its authorship. This question of little relevance to us here, however, except as it concerns date. If the author was Peter the apostle, then this implies an early date (assuming that the tradition of his martyrdom under Nero, in the 60s, is correct). Pseudonymous authorship, however, would open up the possibility of a much later date – perhaps as late as the early second century. The lack of scholarly consensus on both these issues, however, should make us wary of drawing any but the most tentative conclusions which depend on a particular dating. Whether we would accept Petrine authorship or not, it seems most probable that we are dealing with a Jewish Christian author, writing from Rome (5:13; 'Babylon' is almost certainly a reference to Rome), to Gentile Christians in Asia Minor. Whoever the author, he also seems to have been able to use Greek naturally and easily; this is seen not only in the quality of Greek in the letter itself, but also in the use of the Septuagint for all the quotations from the Jewish Scriptures. The Septuagint has a particular theology and ideology, and it is tempting to conclude from his wide use of it that the writer of the letter must have been shaped by its values; this assumption must be treated with caution, however; an

³ E.g. Box, H.S. (ed.), *Priesthood, by Various Writers* (London: SPCK, 1937); Christou, S., *The Priest and the People of God: A Royal Priesthood* (Phoenix, 2003); Coxworth, C. & Brown, R., *Being a Priest Today: Exploring Priestly Identity* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2nd edn 2006)

⁴ Cf. also Leithart, P.J., 'Womb of the World: Baptism & the Priesthood of the New Covenant in Hebrews 10:19-22', *JSNT* 78 (2000) 49-65

Israelite Jew (if that is what he is), used to using the Hebrew Bible but now writing in Greek, may simply use the Greek version most readily available, without it necessarily being a reflection of his theology. Nevertheless, its widespread use throughout the Greek-speaking Jewish world means that its distinctive theology and interpretations are likely to have been significant in shaping Diaspora Jewish thought.

The letter is written to encourage a group of Christian communities living in difficult times, finding themselves in a society where Christians seem to have been treated with suspicion or even actively persecuted. Much attention has been given to the identification of the persecution described, and it does not seem helpful to rehearse the arguments here; suffice it then to say that the current general agreement, that no official period of persecution by the state seems adequately to match the context of the letter, is probably correct. Rather, what is envisaged seems to be a more general attitude of dislike, perhaps spilling over into violence and maybe passively supported by the 'blind eye' of the authorities. Nevertheless, it is clear that the troubles experienced by these Christian communities were real and frightening.

The isolation of the churches addressed from society at large – at least in terms of values and attitudes – envisaged by the writer, is reflected in his choice of terminology to describe the recipients. He identifies them as a 'Diaspora', or 'dispersion' and as exiles – a group belonging to one culture, but living spread among a different, alien culture.

The two references to priesthood within the epistle are found at 2:5 and 2:9. The first of these refers to the churches receiving the letter as a 'holy priesthood', and the latter, as a 'royal priesthood'. The relationship between these two verses is a matter of some debate.

1 Peter 2:9 – *Basileion hierateuma*

The author's quotation from Exodus 19:6 comes, typically, from the Septuagint. The primary question surrounding the word *basileion* is whether it is to be understood as a noun or as an adjective. In other words, is the phrase as a whole to be read as two separate designations for those addressed (with *basileion* meaning 'palace' or 'kingdom'), or as a single, two-word phrase (*basileion* translated 'royal')? If the former of these two options is followed, and given the rhetorical flow of descriptive phrases, it seems on balance perhaps the more convincing,⁵ then whichever reading is right in the case of the Septuagint, in the case of 1 Peter 2:9, *basileion* means 'royal'; either the priests themselves are royal, or (perhaps more likely) it reflects their service of God as King.

Hierateuma, which is first found in the Septuagint, appears in extant literature only a small number of times up to and including the period of its inclusion in 1 Peter, and only in Jewish or Christian writings.⁶ In his analysis of the Septuagint's use of the word,

⁵ Per Michaels, J.R., *1 Peter* (WBC 49; Waco: Word Books, 1988) 108-9; but cf. Selwyn, E.G., *The First Epistle of Saint Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1955) 165-7; Elliott, J.H., *The elect and the holy : an exegetical examination of 1 Peter 2:4-10 and the phrase basileion hierateuma* (Leiden: Brill, 1966) 149-53

⁶ LXX Ex. 19:6; 23:22; one fragment of *Test Levi* 11:6 (Fragment 67); 2 Macc. 2:17; Philo, *De Sobr.* 66; *De Abr.* 56

Elliott focuses on the *-euma* ending, which, he argues, gives the word an essentially functional and corporate meaning, emphasising a group or community engaged in the action of priestly service. For this reason, his preferred translation is not 'priesthood', but 'body of priests'.⁷ Following Cerfaux⁸, however, he does regard the designation as a badge of identity; both scholars associate the concept of *hierateuma* with the idea of Diaspora Jews as a *politeuma*, meaning a community of one nationality living abroad. Thus, the Jews of the dispersion became "a priestly community charged with the worship of the true god," with "a divinely endowed religious mission to fulfil."⁹ This may stretch the understanding of the word, endowing it with a specific application which it does not fully justify, but the Septuagint, in Exodus 19:6, applies the identity to the Jewish people as a whole, whether or not it belongs with particular force to the Diaspora.

Given the repetition of *hierateuma* from verse 5, but accompanied by a different adjective, the phrase *basileion hierateuma*, or '**royal** priesthood' must presumably contribute something distinctive to the overall understanding of the Christian community found in 1 Peter 2. It may reflect an ideology of priesthood coupled with that of the kingdom – Israel as a holy land, with its Temple and priesthood at its heart. This view of Israel is bound up with the messianic expectation within 1st century Judaism; the messianic figure, although his nature and identity differed from group to group, was generally perceived as a kingly figure, in the line of David, and the age of messianic rule would therefore be the life of a kingdom, whether earthly or other-worldly. Christianity, as a messianic sect, might therefore be expected to reflect such an ideology.

Its identity as a kingdom, under God's rule and, beneath God, under the rule of a divinely appointed king, was seen to give Israel a special identity.¹⁰ At its centre stood the Temple, where God resided, and its priesthood, to serve God in his Temple; these emphasised and reinforced this identity, and remained strong in the Jewish psyche and self-identity, standing as symbols of nationhood for some time after 70.¹¹ Temple and priesthood also serve to emphasise the separateness of Israel; both as a special kingdom and as a priesthood, Israel has a unique standing and identity, which set it apart from the world at large. If, as is often argued, a key theme for 1 Peter is the adoption, by the Christian community, of the identity, rôle and privileges of Israel, if Christians take on the identity of Israel, its temple and its priesthood,¹² then the importance attached to Israel as a kingdom would be something we might expect to find reflected in the letter.

If, however, if Peter's primary ideology is of the church as a priestly diaspora, to what extent is this consistent with its corporate identity as a people bound together into a kingdom, living under the rule of a King whom they also serve as one, united

⁷ (1966) 65-8

⁸ (1939) 11-13; Elliott (1966) 69-70 follows this view with caution

⁹ Elliott (1966) 69

¹⁰ Cf. Maccabees' idealisation of kingdom and king. 2 Macc contains one of few early instances of *hierateuma*

¹¹ Cf. the emphasis on correct Temple procedure by the later, Rabbinic writers

¹² This is possible either pre-70, rendering the Temple and its cult obsolete, or post-70 replacing a now destroyed temple and deposed priesthood.

priesthood? The Diaspora ideology also sees Christians assuming the identity of Israel and its cult, but in this instance taking on the identity which, according to Cerfaux and Elliott, Alexandrian Jewish theology¹³ attributes to the Jewish Diaspora: its identity as a priestly community living a holy life in an unholy world. This would still give to the Christian 'exiles' (1:1) a special and unique identity, but perhaps more of a focus on its mission to the world, rather than its separation from it. There is still a degree of separateness, but it is rather more nuanced; Christians have a distinct and special rôle, but it is one to be lived out in the world, perhaps for the benefit of the world.

If this Diaspora ideal is the dominant theme in the author's perception of Christian identity, then a 'royal' priesthood becomes a little harder to explain. The reason for the choice of adjective may, however, perhaps be found in the need for a value and a self-identity to hold together this priesthood; this need becomes all the stronger if the priesthood is dispersed around the world, living in exile. The sense of being united by one, sovereign ruler, joining in a shared service to one God, perhaps then takes on an increased urgency. As the letter seems to be written to a series of *Gentile* Christian communities, it may also not be unreasonable to see the idea of priesthood as necessarily linked to God's sovereignty over all people; thus, the borrowing of a term which might seem to emphasise a people living in one location, under one ruler and worshipping a national god, takes on increased power and significance when extended not just to members of that nation or race living abroad, but also to those with no such claim to nationality or citizenship.

The themes of Diaspora and exile, and the priestly identity of those living under such circumstances, fit well with what seems to be the purpose and central message of the letter – how to live as Christians in the world and cause others to glorify God (2:12). The household code (2:18-3:7), and advice to the recipients about how to conduct themselves so as to give no grounds for persecution or, failing that, to remain blameless under suffering (2:20-24; 3:14-18; 4:1,12-16,19; 5:8-10), are entirely consistent with a people whose calling is to live under the rule of God, as a priesthood in the service of God, in a world which does not know the truth as they see it.

Consistent with an identity built around either the ideology of kingdom and divine rule, or the concept of a priestly Diaspora, but worthy of a mention in its own right, is the possibility that *basileion hierateuma* is intended to emphasise the idea of holiness, which is coupled with that of priesthood only four verses earlier. I shall examine this in a little more detail below. In the meantime, it is worth noting that the inclusion of the word *hierateuma* twice in so few verses seems to suggest that a link existed in the author's mind between the concepts of holiness and royalty, at least insofar as they relate to the third concept of priesthood, or at least that he intended some overarching interpretation of priesthood, consistent with both. Thus, 'royal' must add some extra dimension to the 'holy' of verse 5; this community of priests is holy precisely *because* it is in the service of God the King.

¹³ Of the early examples of the use of the word *hierateuma*, the Septuagint, 2 Maccabees and the writings of Philo are all associated with Jewish scholarship in Alexandria.

The ideology of the temple and priesthood was strong in the Jewish Diaspora¹⁴ and for generations after 70.¹⁵ So central were these concepts to the identity of the kingdom of Israel, that it is hard to imagine that the idea of 'kingdomhood' was not also significant. It seems, from the author's dramatic application of various Jewish scriptural designations for Israel to the Christian communities to which he writes, that 1 Peter sees the Christians as taking over or sharing in the identity of Israel. The fact that he writes probably *from* the Diaspora (Rome), *to* 'the exiles of the Diaspora' (1:1) suggests that he may also see these communities as assuming this dimension of Jewish identity and its associated ideology. Even if it goes too far to suggest that the term *hierateuma* was coined purely for the Jewish Diaspora, the Jews of the dispersion are likely to have a particular perspective on Israel's rôle and identity, and on what this may mean for their day-to-day lives. The extent to which life as a 'royal priesthood' in exile brings a missiological responsibility, however, is not clear; the letter's concern for how Christians should live in the world does not clarify whether this is purely for their own sake, to avoid persecution or ensure their own reward, or for the world's sake.

Ultimately, 'priesthood' is about the community's special relationship and standing with God, while 'royal' emphasises both this and the sovereignty of the God they serve. It is part of a series of descriptive phrases which emphasise the fact that here is a community which in a very special way *belongs to God* (*eklekton, hagion*; cf. v.10: *nun de laos theou*).

While much has been written about the biblical roots and contemporary Jewish understanding of the concept of a 'royal priesthood', New Testament scholars have been largely silent on the subject of what a Gentile audience, living in a context dominated by Pagan religion, perhaps themselves recent converts, might have made of this. Would it simply have been accepted as an alien, Jewish idea, to be accepted and adopted by those wishing to be good members of this sect of Jewish origin, or would they have brought any distinctive understanding or interpretation to bear upon it? Is there, in other words, an ideological link between the two concepts of royalty and priesthood, which would have been significant for a Gentile Christian in the pagan environment of Asia Minor, and which might have affected his or her understanding of this piece of Jewish scripture?

The influence of Jewish interpretation cannot of course be disregarded, in a context where Jewish Scripture was being accepted as holy and to be revered. This is perhaps especially the case if the letter is considered to be early in date, such that the Christian community receiving the letter consisted predominantly of converts; Jewish scriptural instruction, under the oversight of the early Apostles, might then be expected to have a strong voice, and we might reasonably expect a higher degree of enthusiasm for the reading and understanding of Scripture from the Asia Minor Christians themselves. Even if the letter is to be dated a generation or two later, however, it seems probable that the interpretations outlined above would be of significance. In this case, the epistle would have been written to a community consisting partly of converts, but largely of those born into, and raised within, the community of believers. The convert's zeal for teaching and understanding may have given way to a more straightforward acceptance of the

¹⁴ E.g. Philo, to whom the Temple is important

¹⁵ Cf. the Rabbinic concern for Temple worship and purity

new *status quo*, but this would also bring familiarity and an absorption of Jewish understandings and ideas, so that they no longer seemed foreign.

The power of local influence and previous beliefs, however, must be considered. If they were all recent converts, then this would be a community whose religious thoughts and assumptions were largely shaped by their Pagan background. If second or third generation Christians, then there would have been time enough for local interpretations of theology or ecclesiology to take root and become a part of the Christian dogma in that part of the Church. For this reason, an investigation into the connections which would have been made by the Asia Minor Christians, when encountering the idea of royalty in the context of religion, and especially when hearing it coupled with priesthood, seems worthwhile.

In the Greek culture to which much of Asia Minor belongs, kingship had, since the fourth century, been an ideal expounded by philosophers¹⁶, though resisted in practice by proud democracies. As monarchy became a political reality across the provinces and city states once united under Alexander, these theories became more popular and widely accepted, as kings, courtiers and people sought to understand and live with the new status quo.

One innovation which accompanied this process was that of ruler-cults and dynastic cults in the Hellenistic kingdoms. Ruler-cults were established, usually within the cities, to honour the kings, or to express gratitude for some benefaction.¹⁷ Some rulers themselves set up official, dynastic cults, often to honour their predecessors, but sometimes to include worship to themselves and their wives.¹⁸ Such cults may have helped to act as a focus for the loyalty and homage of the royal household, or perhaps as an encouragement for similar loyalty (and more voluntary ruler-cults) from the conquered cities.

Given the strength of the ideological link between religion and monarchy in the Greek cities of Asia Minor, it is perhaps unsurprising that in this region were to be found some significant centres of Imperial Cult during the period of Roman rule. This may well have been encouraged, as a means of ensuring loyalty from this part of the Empire, but also appears to have been, by then, a natural cultural approach to a ruler. The Romans themselves, with their historians' account of the period of monarchy and its replacement by the Republic, were proud of their lack of a king; to the outsider (as, for example, the inhabitants of Asia Minor), however, it seems that the Emperor was merely a king by another name.

¹⁶ E.g. Plato, *Politicus* (294a); *Laws* (IV.711e-712a); many others focus on the qualities possessed by an ideal king, e.g. Xenophon, *Cyropaedeia*; *Hieron*; Isocrates, *Nicocles*

¹⁷ E.g. cult to Antigonus at Scepsis in 311, for the peace he had negotiated and the protection that came with it; cf. cult to Demetrius *Soter* at Athens in 294, after he had liberated the city from Lachares, restored democracy and given a gift of wheat; for the claim that the initiative came from the cities themselves (whether or not in response to pressure), Balsdon (1950) 383-8; Price, S.R.F., *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984) 36-7

¹⁸ E.g. Seleucid cult established by Antiochus III, directed to himself, his wife Laodice, and his ancestors

If it is right that the Emperor was widely regarded among his Greek subjects as kingly, then it is interesting to consider the impact which might have been had, in Asia Minor, by the widespread Imperial ideology which presented the Emperor and his family in a priestly role.¹⁹ In a context where a foreign 'king' was accepted not merely as a human ruler, but also as a god, such a revered figure presented as a priest represents an interesting model. Was this a figure and an ideal which would come to mind to a Christian in Asia Minor, when confronted with the concept of a 'royal priesthood'?

In Rome, whatever the status of the Emperor and regardless of the widespread objections to kingship, was found the priestly office of *Rex Sacrorum*. Roman and later historians have understood this to have been a means of preserving the inviolable religious role and duties of the king, as monarchy gave way to republic²⁰. More recently²¹, it has been suggested that the *Rex Sacrorum* may always have existed, alongside the political *Rex*. Either way, this role speaks of some ideological link between the concepts of royalty and priesthood; it was deemed necessary, even after Roman political life had moved away from monarchical rule, for a kingly figure to maintain leadership within the religious life of the republic and later the empire. A link may also have existed between the monarchy and the Vestal Virgins, who have been seen as the continuation of a sacred role formerly belonging to the king's daughters²². It is not clear, however, how strong these particular expressions of such an ideology would have been, as far away as Asia Minor.

It seems that, if 'royal priesthood' held any meaning to a Gentile Christian in Asia Minor, beyond the received Jewish interpretation, then the figure of the Emperor must be significant. As both priest and god, the Emperor models a special form of priesthood, in which he serves the gods and shares in their nature and glory. Inasmuch as a 'royal priesthood' could be seen as drawing its meaning from the royalty of the god (or divinity of the king), such a priesthood would draw its special status from that of its deity, so the impact would be to emphasise the relationship between the priesthood and its deity, rather than the nature of the priesthood *per se*. The priesthood is special precisely because of the god it serves. Once the ideology which portrays the 'king' also as priest is brought into play, the 'royal priesthood' is special because it both serves the kingly god and shares in the ideal which he models. The Christians of Asia Minor serve not the Emperor but Christ; the Lordship and Kingship of Christ (to the extent that these are important concepts for them) may be seen to reflect glory on them and the priesthood which they form. What is less clear is the extent to which the image of Christ as Priest is significant for them; is there any sense in which they share in a Priesthood which Christ models? 1 Peter 2:5 speaks of 'spiritual sacrifices' being offered to God 'through' (*dia*) Christ; this may have suggested a priestly, mediating role for Christ, although this may be to push the meaning too far; similarly, the Temple-language of 1 Peter 2, and the pattern set by Christ for the believers (2:4-8), combined with the link to the 'royal priesthood' of Exodus 19:6 (2:9), holds echoes of shared Temple-service, but stops

¹⁹ E.g. statue of Tiberius in the temple dedicated to him at Smyrna, although this places him as a priest in his own cult (Price, 1984, 185)

²⁰ E.g. Livy; cf. Beard, M., North, J. & Price, S., *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998) 54-7

²¹ Cornell, T.J., *The Beginnings of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars (c. 1000-264 BC)* (London: Routledge, 1995) 235-6; Beard et al., *ibid*, 57-8

²² Cf. Beard et al., *ibid*, 58, arguing that there is no evidence for such a blood relationship

short of actual priestly Christology. Certainly, no High-Priestly role for Christ, akin to that found in Hebrews, is evident in the Christology of writings sent to Asia Minor, although this proves nothing conclusive either way about the views of that community itself.

1 Peter 2:5 – *Hierateuma hagion*

It is usual, within both Jewish and the majority of Pagan thought of the first century, for qualification to perform priestly service to be related more to purity than to holiness. The two ideas are often used interchangeably, but are by no means identical. Holiness would seem to imply a moral character, while purity is essentially an amoral concept, concerned with a person's perceived fitness to enter the place of worship, and often dictated by external circumstances. A woman after childbirth, for example, was considered impure and could not enter the Temple for a prescribed number of days (longer if she bore a girl than a boy), but it was not considered sinful for her to bear children – even girls! Similarly, it was a son's duty to bury his parents, even though coming into contact with their corpses, as he inevitably would, placed him in a state of impurity.

This is not to say that neither Jew nor Pagan had any concept of holiness. For the people of Israel, being 'holy' meant living in accordance with the Torah, and in the close relationship with God which this would bring about. This was the responsibility and calling of Israel, both corporately and individually. For Romans and Greeks, 'holiness' is related to the ethical standard of living which one might observe; in a cultic priest, as opposed to the priests of the state religions, particularly in some of the eastern cults, 'holiness' was brought about by setting oneself apart entirely for the god or goddess whom the priest or priestess served. This might be by a vow, temporary or permanent, or might even be by a physical sign of commitment such as castration, contrasting markedly with the purity requirement in much official Greek religion, whereby only those without physical impairment were eligible for priestly office.

The writer of 1 Peter could perhaps be seen to be transforming the concept of purity into holiness. This is, of course, a somewhat simplistic account of his ethics, and cannot begin to account adequately for his ecclesiology, but it may be one small strand among many which feed into his transformation of the imagery and ideology of Israel into an account of the status of the church. In applying to them the analogy of the Temple and its priesthood, he implicitly calls on them to observe standards of purity which are not ritual, but are brought about by the blameless life to which he exhorts them.²³ Thus he blurs the edges slightly between holiness and purity. Other groups or sects which either perceived themselves, or have since been perceived by others, to have a priestly identity, generally emphasised the need for ritual purity.²⁴ For 1 Peter, however, the Christian community's priestly vocation, among other things, requires a standard of purity which should characterise the church's lifestyle and ethics.

²³ E.g. 1:22, where purification is explicitly a consequence of obedience, an aspect of their relationship with God

²⁴ Take, for example, the Pharisees, who seem to have observed purity requirements rigorously, erring on the side of over-compensation in order to avoid falling below the minimum standards; also, the Essene community at Qumran, whose priestly self-understanding led them to live apart, maintaining a discipline of ritual purification, although the distinction between members who were actually priests and those who were not was taken seriously.

A person or community can practice holiness, with such a strong emphasis on purity, for his, her or its own sake; this leads naturally to a focus on separation from the rest of the world, whether literally, by living in retreat, or more metaphorically, by codes of conduct or rituals which set those who are holy apart and mark them out as special. Equally, however, holiness can be practised for others' sake, in order to set them an example, or to sanctify them by intercession and rituals on behalf of others; by living in a holy way within an unholy world. There is perhaps an element of both these motivations in 1 Peter. The recipients are called to a blameless life partly in order to avoid persecution and to mark them out as different from the world in the values they hold and the conduct they display.²⁵ This compares with the priestly identity of Israel, and the Diaspora in particular, as set against the world; marks of belonging to a distinct, special community (such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, food laws) were important and tended to prevent over-assimilation with wider society. On the other hand, the Christians of Asia Minor are also called to holiness and a pure way of life so that those among whom they live and work may be brought to 'glorify God' (2:12 – *doxasasin ton Theon*); as with Israel, the 'exiles of the Diaspora' are set apart from the world in order that they may live by standards that the world fails even to recognise, and so that through them the world may be sanctified.

Conclusion

A holy and royal priesthood, as an identity for the church, is a fundamentally missiological concept. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers does, of course, have much to say about the way in which it is possible for believers to approach God; indeed, at its heart is the believer's relationship with God of a quality and depth which would not be possible through any human mediator or without the mediation of Christ. It is also, however, crucially about the way that the church, as a priestly community, relates to the world in which it finds itself.

This understanding of the doctrine, shaped by 1 Peter and its context, raises some (deliberately provocative) questions. Is holiness lived out in the workplace a truer expression of priestly office than, for example, presidency at the Eucharist – the traditional role of the Christian ordained Priest? In the idealised hierocracy of Israel (however limited in practice by Roman rule), priests and other religious leaders shared in the leadership and government of the nation. In Rome, priestly office was generally granted by the state and often held in conjunction with political office, and much religious responsibility – for sacrifice, prayers, interpreting signs of the gods' anger – lay with the Roman Senate; this was often the case also for the ruling bodies of Greek cities. Such then, was the context in which the epistle was written and received; should we too understand the rôle of Government, with its capacity for involvement in and influence on the world, to be priestly – perhaps more priestly than that of leading other Christians in worship? Philo, writing at around the same time as the author of 1 Peter, painted a picture in which the original priestly identity, from which official priesthood was derived, is that of the family, sacrificing the Passover lamb; after all, he points out, this central part of Jewish ritual tradition predates the establishment of the Temple or its priesthood. In much of the Roman empire, the *paterfamilias* (the male head of the

²⁵ Cf. the contrast between their former life and what is now required of them, described in terms of holiness, in 1:14-16.

household) was responsible for offering sacrifice to the household gods and leading his family and servants in their religious duty. It is interesting to consider how such family-centred 'priestly' office might have survived the conversion of a household to Christianity, and interesting also to ask whether the spiritual teaching and guidance of our own children and those within our churches (as we promise at each infant baptism) might be more priestly a task than the pursuit of our own holiness.

Of course, the worship of the Christian community (including its sharing in the Eucharist), and a concern for purity and holiness in Christian life and worship, are both valid and essential expressions of that community's priesthood. But a Christian community which looks only inward, to its own affairs and its own relationship with God – or an individual believer who does likewise in her or his own life – will be only half-priestly, serving God on its, his or her own behalf but not on behalf of those others who should be represented. A priest, a corporate priesthood or a priestly community stands before God on behalf of the community (as a congregation offering intercessory prayer for the world) and before the world as a representative of God (in mission and service). Ultimately, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, taking seriously 1 Peter as part of its roots, is not concerned with specific roles or ministries, but rather with the way in which the priestly church community relates first to God and then to the world. To fulfil its priestly calling, it must serve God, and in serving God, it must serve the present age.