

The Counselor as Priest:

Offering Care to Help Others Draw Near to Christ

The priest is [was] a living version of the tabernacle.
Ed Welch, *Created To Draw Near*¹

Not only are we the freest of kings, we are also priests forever, which is far more excellent than being kings, for as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things.

Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*

Welcome and introduction:

What comes to your mind when you think of the word *priest*?

Ed Welch: The mind reels as soon as we say the word priest. We have all kinds of connotations. One is if we run back into the Old Testament, we see old men with long beards and fancy garments. If we move to the present day, we picture people who are different than we are. They look different; they're in a different class than we are. Many times, they speak words that build us up, but there are times when they can use their power to harm as well. The reality is that we are priests and it turns out that it's one of the most significant identities that all of us share as human beings.²

¹ Edward T. Welch, *Created to Draw Near: Our Life As God's Royal Priests*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020), 87.

² <https://servantsofgrace.org/christian-you-are-a-priest/>.

How do counselors embrace and embody the work of a priest?

Priests reflect the living God

Ed Welch: The priest is [was] a living version of the tabernacle. The priest and tabernacle both image[d] God.³

1 Samuel 2:12–36: *Eli's worthless sons*

[12] Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the LORD. [13] The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, [14] and he would thrust it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot. All that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there.

Friends, first and foremost, counselors accurately reflect the living God because they know the living God!

Harold Senkbeil: Once it dawns on us that we're not just religious activity directors or spiritual life coaches, but genuine emissaries of the living God, then we can't be satisfied with just going through the motions. As agents of the living Lord we find new contentment and fulfillment in our work.⁴

Priests represent the Lord to their counselees

³ Welch, *Created to Draw Near*, 87.

⁴ Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart*, (Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2019), 192.

Ed Welch: The heart of the priestly job description is fellowship with the Lord...It could be no other way when we are invited to live at the junction of heaven and earth...Our identity as priests is accompanied by a meaningful mission. Boredom is not an option.⁵

Peter J. Leithart: Priests were sacred butchers, butlers, and bakers. They butchered the animals, ground the grain, and baked the bread that was placed on the altars. Yahweh's altar was his table (Ezekiel 41:22; 44:16), where priests offered his morning and evening "bread" (cf. Leviticus 3:11; 21:21-22). Priestly ministry at the altar was their "table service" before Yahweh.⁶

If our representation of the Lord happens when we stand and serve in his name...what does that look like in action? What does it look like when we take on Jesus' name and ministry to others:

- We represent the Lord when we urge and call our counselees to holiness
- We represent the Lord when we support and sustain our counselees in suffering
- We represent the Lord when we help bind up the brokenheartedness of our counselees
- We represent the Lord when we bring good news to weary souls
- We represent the Lord when we proclaim a path of liberty and freedom to our counselee who are ensnared, trapped, or paralyzed
- We represent the Lord when we move into shameful and dark areas of our counselee's lives and speak words of life to them
- We represent the Lord when we offer new clothing in exchange for their garments that are tattered and soiled
- We represent the Lord when we bring words of comfort and healing to those who are grieving⁷

⁵ Welch, *Created to Draw Near*, 89.

⁶ Peter J. Leithart, "Priesthood of All Believers," October 29, 2010, *First Things*.
<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2010/10/priesthood-of-believers>. Accessed 17 June 2020.

⁷ cf. Isaiah 61:1-3:

[1] The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
[2] to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;

Priests remember and remind

Martin Luther [preface to the Psalter]: The fact that we are all priests and kings means that each of us Christians may go before God and intercede for the other. If I notice that you have no faith or a weak faith, I can ask God to give you a strong faith.

Timothy George captures Luther's viewpoint in one sentence: "Every Christian is *someone else's* priest, and we are all priests *to one another*."⁸

Timothy George continues, "But for Luther, the priesthood of all believers did not mean, 'I am my own priest.' It meant rather: In the community of saints, God has so tempered the body that we are all priests to each other. We stand before God and intercede for one another, we proclaim God's Word to one another and we celebrate his presence among us in worship, praise, and fellowship."⁹

Martin Luther: Not only are we the freest of kings, we are also priests forever, which is far more excellent than being kings, for as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things. These are the functions of priests, and they cannot be granted to any unbeliever. Thus Christ has made it possible for us, provided we believe in him, to be not only his brethren, co-heirs, and fellow-kings, but also his fellow-priests. Therefore we may boldly come into the presence of God in the spirit of faith [Heb. 10:19, 22] and cry "Abba, Father!" pray for one another, and do all things which we see done and foreshadowed in the outer and visible works of priests. (*The Freedom of a Christian*)

What do we remind our counselees of?

to comfort all who mourn;
[3] to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.

⁸ Peter J. Leithart, "Priesthood of all Believers," October 29, 2010, *First Things*.

<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2010/10/priesthood-of-believers>. Accessed 17 June 2020.

⁹ Timothy George, "The Priesthood of all Believers," October 31, 2016, *First Things*, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/10/the-priesthood-of-all-believers>. Accessed 17 June 2020.

Priests restore and reconcile

Ed Welch: The job of subduing the earth continues unabated from the original commission. We are stewards of the earth. But the souls of humanity have become our primary stewardship.¹⁰

Leithart explains, “With the arrival of a new and better priesthood through Jesus (Hebrews 4-5, 7), Christians united to Christ who is King and Priest are priests and kings in him (Revelation 1:6; 5:10). All that the Aaronic priests did in shadowy ways at the tabernacle, believers now do in reality in the heavenly sanctuary. And, just as the Aaronic priests served Israel by serving in Yahweh’s house, so the new Christian priestly labor is corporate ministry in the church.”¹¹

Peter J. Leithart: In the old order, priestly service was housekeeping. In the new order, all are priests, called to the ministry of body building.¹²

How do we do this?

¹⁰ Welch, *Created to Draw Near*, 91.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Peter J. Leithart, “Priesthood of All Believers,” October 29, 2010, *First Things*.
<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2010/10/priesthood-of-believers>. Accessed 17 June 2020.

Conclusion

Peter J. Leithart: Priestly ministry was ministry within and to the church. To be a priest means to be a priest for someone.¹³

Being a priest for someone means we engage in the following priestly actions:

- Reflect
- Represent
- Remember and remind
- Restore and reconcile

BENEDICTION:

Revelation 1:4–8: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, [5] and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood [6] and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. [7] Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. [8] “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

¹³ Peter J. Leithart, “Priesthood of all Believers,” October 29, 2010, *First Things*.
<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2010/10/priesthood-of-believers>. Accessed 17 June 2020.

Resources:

Ed Welch, *Created to Draw Near: Our Life as God's Royal Priests*
Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*
Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart*
John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*

Martin Luther: You will ask, "If all who are in the church are priests, how do these whom we now call priests differ from laymen?" I answer: Injustice is done those words "priest," "cleric," "spiritual," "ecclesiastic," when they are transferred from all Christians to those few who are now by a mischievous usage called "ecclesiastics." Holy Scripture makes no distinction between them, although it gives the name "ministers," "servants," "stewards" to those who are now proudly called popes, bishops, and lords and who should according to the ministry of the Word serve others and teach them the faith of Christ and the freedom of believers. Although we are all equally priests, we cannot all publicly minister and teach. We ought not do so even if we could. Paul writes accordingly in I Cor. 4 [1], "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God."

Peter J. Leithart: Unfortunately, the priesthood of the faithful in both its Protestant and Catholic forms has been corroded by fusion with modern individualism. While no denomination sanctions this fusion, strains in popular Protestantism, especially American Protestantism, have taken "priesthood of believers" to mean that every believer has an absolute right of private judgment about morals and doctrine, the liberty to interpret the Bible with complete autonomy.

"Priesthood of believers" means that believers can do very well without attachment to any church, thank you very much. Each believer is a church unto himself. Renouncing Rome's one Pope, Protestantism has created thousands.¹⁴

¹⁴ Peter J. Leithart, "Priesthood of All Believers," October 29, 2010, *First Things*.
<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2010/10/priesthood-of-believers>. Accessed 17 June 2020.