

NOTE ON THE IDEA OF PARTICIPATION IN
THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST

The use of language of this kind has surely been felt to be justified not only as a dogmatic construction but because it is scriptural. It welds together the application of 'priest' language to Christ in Hebrews and its application to Christians in I Peter and John's Apocalypse. Nowadays we are disinclined to build doctrine on the foundation of the presence of words in quite discrete and disparate biblical writings. So the idea must be evaluated on its intrinsic merits.

It has a certain empirical justification. Undoubtedly, much of what is contained within the idea of Christ's priesthood (whether content is given to that word from Hebrews or from its more general associations) lies within the life and task of the Church and of the ministry, e.g. voicing the worship due to God, mediating knowledge of God, bringing men to new awareness of Him and new relationship with Him.

These plain facts may well be held to warrant this language and to be proof against all objection. Further, at the doctrinal level, the discourse and thought which stem from the 'in Christ' language of Paul and John and which have been so fertile in Christian theology naturally give rise to it.

However, other associations of priesthood - again both as applied to Jesus in Hebrews and on the basis of its more general use - provoke caution. In Hebrews, Jesus is priest precisely because he does what none other can do. There is only one priest after the order

of Melchisedech. And in general sacerdotal imagery - (speaking now in religionsgeschichtliche terms) - one of the great things about priests, a condition of their usefulness, is that they are not as other men, but stand apart, doing, in the things concerning God, what the rest of men cannot do: they are in the sphere of the holy. The very point about priests is that others cannot participate in their priesthood, and in so far as Christ is unique this language applies to Him wholly appropriately.

Two distinctions help to clarify the matter. In so far as the idea of priesthood is applied to Christ's unique role - his work - it is misleading to speak of anybody else's participation in it; and as the source of the idea, Hebrews, does so apply it, use of participation-language will always cause anxiety to those for whom Hebrews is near the top of the mind. But in so far as it may suitably be applied to the state of affairs which results from Christ's work (his finished work), then clearly it is not only permissible but necessary to speak of the Christian's participation in it. Second and similarly, the associations of the term priesthood are such that both overlap and distinction are present in the relationship between those activities of Christ and the Church which the term suitably illuminates. Both share a certain area; each has a peculiar area. So, while participation language has its hazards, it cannot be excluded. The truth is that both 'priesthood' and 'participation' contain so many different ideas, having expanded and spread in the course of long use, that analysis and further definition are necessary. It might be preferable to seek other, less ambiguous terms.

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