What is the Baptist view of the priesthood of all believers, and what is the practical significance of that view? These are the questions the editors of this Journal asked for me to address in this article.

In one sense, there is no Baptist view of the priesthood of all believers, only Baptist views. Malcolm Yarnell helpfully divides past Baptist voices into two major strands—the “formative” and the “fragmentary.”¹ Seventeenth-century Baptist pastor John Smyth provides a paragon of the formative, while turn-of-the-19th-century seminary president Edgar Young (E. Y.) Mullins offers the fragmentary. Early Baptists like Smyth, together with their confessions, pointed to Christ’s offices of prophet, priest, and king, which then translate through the new covenant into the saints’ three-fold work of proclamation, worship, and government.² Smyth argued that the priestly work of the saints consists in offering spiritual sacrifices through prayer, praise, and obedience. Their kingly work involved them in admonition, examination, excommunication, and absolution.³ Moving into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, pastors like Daniel Turner, Andrew Fuller, and Isaac Backus continued this tradition, placing the priestly duties of every member inside the ecclesial structures of local churches, led by church officers and joined to Baptist associations.⁴
Meanwhile, members of the fragmentary strand, which includes names like Roger Williams, John Leland, and Francis Wayland, spent more time emphasizing the free will, the conscience, and the individual’s unmediated access to God. They tended to be one or two clicks more suspicious of ecclesiastical authority and church partnerships. The most pronounced voice for this tradition was E. Y. Mullins. His doctrine of soul competency treated direct access to God as the right of all souls apart from the interference of any church, pastor, or creed. Southern Baptist leader Herschel Hobbs pushed the message of soul competency well into the middle of the twentieth century, helping to ensure it appeared in the 1963 Baptist Faith & Message.

These two visions clashed most publicly among the 32,727 messengers at the 1988 Southern Baptist convention in San Antonio, Texas. Conservatives presented a resolution affirming the formative view of the priesthood of all believers. The resolution observed that emphasizing the priesthood of all believers was a “recent historical development” in Southern Baptist life, but that that emphasis had been “used to justify wrongly the attitude that a Christian may believe whatever he so chooses and still be considered a loyal Southern Baptist.” Therefore, the resolution then asked the SBC to “affirm its belief in the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of the believer (1 Peter 2:9 and Revelation 1:6),” yet it wanted this affirmation hemmed in by three qualifications: (i) “that this doctrine in no way gives license to misinterpret, explain away, demythologize, or extrapolate out elements of the supernatural from the Bible”; (ii) that it “in no way contradicts the biblical understanding of the role, responsibility, and authority of the pastor which is seen in the command to the local church in Hebrews 13:17, ‘Obey your leaders, and submit to them’”; and (iii) that “elders, or pastors, are called of God to lead the local church (Acts 20:28).” The resolution passed 54.75 percent to 45.25 percent. Disappointed, moderates marched from the convention center in San Antonio to the Alamo, singing, “We Shall Overcome.” Upon arriving they tore up their paper copies of the resolution and sang Martin Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” They regarded the whole affair as an assault on lay leadership and as an endorsement of pastoral dominance.

All this to say, it’s difficult to speak in the singular about a Baptist perspective on the priesthood of believers. Still, inside this energetic tension between the formative and fragmentary traditions we find fodder for understanding what may be unique in the Baptist perspective on this doctrine—the stardust
out of which a Baptist solar system just might form. The formative maintains a prominent role for a believer’s corporate identity and for pastoral leadership, albeit with a congregationally-ruled backstop. The fragmentary pushes hard on the democratic impulses within the doctrine. I place myself within the first stream. I believe it strikes the right balance. Nonetheless, I appreciate the pull of the fragmentary. The tension between the corporate and the individual, or, alternatively, the pastoral/clerical and the individual, is a necessary tension within the doctrine. Whether Baptist or not, churches and theologians easily veer too far toward one or the other. Medieval Roman Catholicism veered too far toward the clerical; E. Y. Mullins too far toward the individual. Others, wanting to pull back from Mullins, push not toward the clerical, per se, but so strongly toward the corporate that the role of the individual almost gets lost. “The priesthood of all believers does not mean the priesthood of every believer,” says one Anglican writer. Baptist theologian, Timothy George, argues similarly: the doctrine does not point to the lonely, isolated seeker of truth, making private judgments, as if each of us is his or her own priests. It points to a congregation of faithful believers united in a common confession working as “priests to each other.” It’s not “the priesthood of the believer,” he says (italics original). It’s the “priesthood of believers (plural).” It’s less about our individual “status,” George continues, and more about our “service” to one another. George, understandably, is responding to the shift away from biblical authority and historic Christian doctrine represented by Mullins and the larger movements of moderate and liberal theologians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet we don’t want to dissolve the individual into the corporate, just as we don’t want the individual lost to the clerical.

A right understanding of the priesthood of all believers involves a role for the individual and the corporate as well as the pastor who leads. And a Baptist perspective, by virtue of an elder-led congregational church polity, strikes that balance better than any, as I’ll seek to show.

Is There Really a Baptist Perspective?

Before I do, it’s worth backing up and viewing the bigger picture. Had the editors of this Journal asked me to write a Baptist perspective on the Trinity, the answer would have been “no.” Baptist theology offers nothing distinct on
the doctrine of the Trinity in comparison to other Protestant or even other historic Christian traditions like Roman Catholicism. What’s needed for the Trinity is a historically Christian perspective. Had they asked for a Baptist perspective on the doctrine of salvation, again, the answer would have been “no.” Baptists have nothing unique to offer relative to their Presbyterian or Anglican or Lutheran friends. What’s needed is a Protestant or historically evangelical perspective. If the invitation focused on ecclesiology well, then, yes, Baptists have something unique to say.

Yet when we turn to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, the story isn’t so simple. Do Baptists have something unique to say about the priesthood of all believers? Is there something in Baptist theology that would cause Baptists to read verses like 1 Peter 2:9 (“But you are… a royal priesthood”) or Revelation 5:10 (“you have made them a kingdom and priests”) differently than a Presbyterian or Anglican would read them?

The challenge is, the doctrine nestles down right in between the last two examples above—in between one’s doctrines of salvation and the church. It provides the connective tissue or bridge, as in, “If this doctrine of salvation, then that ecclesiology.”

Doctrines of: salvation  ➔   royal priesthood ➔   church.

Should we therefore name that bridge after the point of origin or the destination—“Protestant” or “Baptist”?

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<th>Salvation</th>
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**Moving from Doctrine of Salvation to Royal Priesthood**

To begin our answer, it’s worth considering the connection between the three doctrines. Connecting the first two, one writer observed, “If justification by faith states the believer’s relationship to God, the priesthood of faith states the inescapable obligations of that relationship.” In other words, the doctrine of priesthood—or as I prefer, the royal priesthood—grows out of the social and ethical dynamics of salvation. Salvation brings a new identity or status, and that identity or status comes with certain responsibilities and
even authorities, just as becoming a “husband” or “father” does. In fact, a better word than identity or status is office, which combines what Timothy George divided: status and service, or identity and responsibility. To hold an office is to possess the status and authority to perform a particular service or fulfill certain responsibilities. Salvation establishes people into the office of priest-king. “For all the righteous possess the priestly order [sacerdotali ordinem],” said Irenaeus.14

How does salvation establish people in the office of priest king? Let me explain in five steps. First, we must understand biblical salvation covenantally. The word or concept of “salvation,” by itself, is a broad idea. One person can “save” another from drowning in a river, from financial ruin, from saying something foolish, from an awkward conversation at a family reunion, or from an evening of boredom. The context determines the meaning and scope of what “salvation” is. Consider then what this means if the context is a relationship established by a contract or a covenant, as with a broken marriage covenant or mortgage contract. To “save” the marriage or the mortgage requires us to attend to the terms of the covenant or contract: “What does fulfilling the covenant require? What penalties does the contract specify for breach of contract?” Saving the marriage or mortgage means restoring the husband and wife or the lender and borrower to the status quo ante, as the philosophers would say.15 Both the negative and the positive must be addressed in considering the scope of salvation—penalties cancelled, terms fulfilled. Upon restoration, the husband will again take up the task of husbanding, the borrower of paying on the mortgage monthly. In Scripture, likewise, we must pay attention to what the covenant required before it was broken in order to best describe the full nature of “salvation.”

Second, recognizing the covenantal nature of salvation helps us to see that salvation must include a restoration to office whenever the original covenant involved an office, as with a husband being restored to the office of husband. An imperiled or lost job is only “saved” when a person is placed back into his or her position. An army captain who appears before a disciplinary review panel for a questionable decision doesn’t merely hope for the removal of penalties and an honorable discharge; he hopes to be restored to the full rights and privileges of a captain. In Scripture, likewise, salvation includes not only the removal of penalties but being restored to responsibility or office.
Third, God’s covenant with Adam in creation included the offices of priest and king, a point I won’t attempt to prove since I and others have done it amply elsewhere. Adam’s office of priest-king is tied to his ontology, his being-ness. God created Adam in his image in order to rule, but he didn’t create him to be an independent and absolute king. He created him to be a king who conveys, displays, mediates the rule of a greater king, himself, an under-king to God’s over-king. Adam was to be an obedient king, a mediating king, a priest king. If a king makes judgments, a priest-king mediates God’s judgments.

Fourth, insofar as Adam’s (and humanity’s) nature and essence was bound up with the office of priest-king, we must understand both sin and salvation in terms of this office. Adam sinned not merely by breaking God’s law, generically defined. He sinned by breaking the creation covenant. When he took the forbidden fruit, he contravened God’s law, yes, but the contravention was a contravention because he was God’s image and he failed to image; he was a priest and he failed to priest. He put himself in God’s place and acted the part of an over-king instead of an under-king. He made his own judgments; he did not mediate God’s. Were Adam God’s equal, one king matched against another, as the serpent implied, eating that which God forbade would not have been sin.

Salvation, likewise, should be understood through the rubric of this office of priest-king. If God created Adam to rule in a manner that mediated God’s own glory—to subdue all creation so that it would be consecrated to the Lord—then presumably “salvation” will include a restoration to this office and activity. Again, God tied the office to Adam’s ontology, so salvation must lead to the office of mediating God’s judgments once more.

Fifth, when we trace the storyline of redemptive history through the rest of the canon, this is what we see: salvation involves a chosen people’s restoration to the office of priest-king. As with Adam, God commands the sacrifice-making priest Noah to be fruitful and multiply as a dominion-establishing king (Gen 9:1-3, 7). Noah fails. The same commands transmit to Abraham and his descendants, yet now God explicitly promises Abraham and his descendants, “I will make you fruitful” and “multiply you” (Gen 17:2,6; 22:16-18; 26:24; 28:3). He then tells the nation of Israel they would become a “kingdom of priests” if they would keep his covenant (Exod 19:6). At the same time, God separates out a class of priests and a class of kings to
make their respective responsibilities clear, like two grand illustrations. The priest’s job, like Adam’s in the garden, was to “work” and “watch over” the tabernacle/temple, keeping it consecrated to the Lord (Gen 2:15; Num 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6). They mediated God judgments by offering sacrifices and then naming things as clean and unclean, holy and unholy. He charges his kings, meanwhile, with establishing order and dominion while following God’s law (see Deut 17:14–20). Yet the nation, its kings, and its priests all fail to do their jobs. Therefore, the prophets promise the special mediatory offices of priest and king would be “democratized” once more; no person would mediate God’s judgments on behalf of another within the community since all would know God (Jer 31:33–34). Christ then came as the second Adam, the perfect priest king, and the giver of a new covenant. He perfectly mediated the judgments of God, speaking only what the Father spoke and doing only what the Father gave him to do. He then ascended his throne, crown of thorns on head, by being lifted up on the cross and giving his life as a ransom for many. Through his sacrifice, he created a new race (new Adams), a royal priesthood (a democracy of priest-kings), a holy nation (a new Israel), and people for God’s own possession (1 Peter 2:9). These priest-kings, too, would mediate the judgments of God, offering the sacrifices of obedience and worship in all of life so that the nations might know who God is and what he is like (see Rom 12:1-2; 1 Peter 2:5). Yet doing this would require them to be marked off and named, identified with God (Matt 16:19; 18:18-20; 28:19-20). They would possess the priestly obligation to each other ensuring they weren’t unequally yoked. “Come out and be separate,” an apostle would say, harkening back to the commands giving to Levitical priests. “Touch no unclean thing, so that holiness might come to completion” (see 2 Cor 6:14–7:1). They would constitute the temple where God dwells, just as he dwelt in the Garden and the tabernacle (1 Cor 3:16-17). Their task, when gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus, would be to mediate the judgments of God: “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus … is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?” (1 Cor 5:4, 12).

In short, salvation establishes people into the office of priest-king. It restores us to what God intended for us in Adam: citizenship in his kingdom and participation in a mediating the judgments of God. The dwelling place of God’s people will again become “like the garden of Eden” (Ezek
By virtue of being covenantally united to Christ—our federal priest and king—every believer receives what’s Christ’s: his righteousness, his blessedness, his status, his mission, his offices and office responsibilities. The covenantal head possesses these offices uniquely, to be sure. Still, our covenantal union means that what’s his becomes ours and ours becomes his, just like a man and a woman declaring in their wedding vows, “With all my worldly goods I thee endow.” Even an office can be conferred through marriage. To marry royalty is to become royalty, as with Cinderella and her prince. With the wedding vow of baptism, whereby we take upon ourselves the name of Father, Son, and Spirit, God declares us priest and kings because Christ is a priest and king.

What is the doctrine of the royal priesthood of believers? It is the Adamic job description and list of responsibilities given to us upon our betrothal to Christ and our adoption as fellow heirs. More substantially, it is the claim that God has given his people the office and the work of mediating his own judgments before the onlooking world.

Luther famously listed seven such responsibilities: preaching the gospel, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church discipline, ministry (offering spiritual sacrifices), prayer, and judging doctrine. Other systematics offer variations on this list. New Testament (NT) theologians emphasize the priestly work of offering spiritual sacrifices, since that’s most explicit in passages like 1 Peter 2 and Romans 12. What’s crucial, I think, is to understand the underlying covenantal storyline and canonical logic. Adam as king subdues and rules, gives form and directs. He makes judgments. Adam as priest links all these activities to God and seeks to ensure they represent God and his own judgments. A priest-king, in short, mediates God’s judgments and represents God’s rule. If God says something is precious and worthy and righteous, a priest-king represents that as precious and worthy and righteous. What God says is evil, he judges as evil. What God speaks and does, he speaks and does. His goal in all of life, whether gathered with God’s people or walking alone through a park, is to display the character and likeness and glory of God, since God’s own glory is what’s most precious to God.

The two offices of priest and king can be pulled apart for illustrative purposes, as they were under the Old Covenant. But ultimately, they belong together since they are bound up with the nature and function of being a God-imager. Imaging God necessarily involves both, as we represent (priest)
God’s rule (king) or mediate (priest) his judgments (king).23

Indeed, the very process of becoming a Christian involves the first steps of this work. “What must we do to be saved?” the people asked Peter. “Repent and be baptized,” came the answer. A person cannot repent until they agree with God's judgments concerning who God is and who we are. To be baptized, then, is to publicly represent or mediate those divine judgments.

Notice, furthermore, that a believer’s status as priest and king is at first individual, even as Adam was an individual and as we are individually united to Christ. The office of priest-king does not depend upon our union with other believers. It depends upon our union with Christ, the covenantal head. That said, the new covenant is not merely a one-on-one marital covenant. It unites us to a people, as with an adoption into a family. Which means, our status as priests and kings is derivatively but simultaneously corporate. We’re priests and kings together with everyone else who belongs to the covenant, like two boys adopted by the same father. They become brothers and together possess all the rights and privileges of the father (see Gal 3:23-4:6). It’s not surprising, then, that God calls his people “a holy nation” at the same time he calls them a “royal priesthood” (Exod 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9).

Thus far, everything I’ve said could be affirmed by Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, or Lutherans alike. We share the same doctrine of the priesthood in so far as share the same doctrine of salvation. One shapes the other. Furthermore, we Protestants can agree upon what this doctrine means in most of life: at home, at work, as citizens, in our marriages, and so forth. In all those domains, we offer spiritual sacrifices by mediating the judgments of God in word and deed. The differences emerge in two very specific locations: who possesses the authority to name or identify both fellow citizens of Christ’s kingdom and what they believe, and can the children of believers possess this status?

When Adam and Eve sinned and were removed from the Garden, they didn’t stop being God-imagers. Fallen humanity still images God. That fact is hard-wired in. It’s our ontology. The trouble is, we do it perversely, like a wavy carnival mirror. We speak like God speaks, but we speak lies. We perpetually make judgments with no regard for him. What happens beginning with the call to Abraham, is that God publicly identifies a group of special people and consecrates them to the task of representing him rightly: these are my people and I am their God. Their task is to model for all humanity what
God expects of all humanity by virtue of being God-imagers. These people are the publicly identified priest-kings and holy nation (Exod 19:5-6). One of the principle challenges for a doctrine of a church, then, is to answer the two questions: Who exactly belongs to this community of publicly-identified priest-kings, and Who gets to name them and what they believe? This, as I said, is where Protestant denominations diverge.

Which brings us to our second movement: from the doctrine of a royal priesthood to the doctrine of the church.

**Moving from Doctrine of Royal Priesthood to Church**

I called the doctrine of the royal priesthood an office that comes with a job description or list of responsibilities and authorities. Yet with a person’s conversion that office and list remain implicit, invisible, unspoken. The Holy Spirit has acted. The person has repented and believed. Yet now the new reality needs to go public. Therefore, a doctrine of the church speaks the list. It makes it visible. It formalizes, institutionalizes, or constitutionalizes the office, making the implicit explicit. Salvation makes a person a priest-king; churches exist to give her a uniform and put her to work. Following the same flow chart above, we can say,

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Salvation → creates an office → publicly identified and given expression by a church
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If the work of a priest-king is to mediate the judgments of God, a local church is where this begins. They do it by teaching the Bible, practicing the ordinances, and obeying everything Christ commands whether gathered and scattered.

The ordinances play an especially crucial role for identifying these new-covenant priest-kings. If circumcision made members of the Abrahamic Covenant visible and Sabbath-keeping members of the Mosaic Covenant visible, so baptism and the Supper make members of the new covenant visible. They are the signs and seals of the New Covenant. They show (sign) and formally affirm (seal) its members, its office-holders. “Through baptism all of us are consecrated to the priesthood,” said Martin Luther. Baptism “ordains” us to office. The Supper then renews and continually reaffirms that membership.

In short, local churches are embassies of heaven, time-machines from the
eschaton. They say to the nations, “We declare on behalf of heaven, here are your priest-kings. Watch and listen to them in order to behold in preliminary fashion the judgments of God.”

Again, none of this is uniquely Baptist. The universality of this priesthood, at least for early Luther, meant that church power rests in the whole congregation. The church possessed the authority to name officers:

For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already consecrated priest, bishop and pope, though … just because we are all in like manner priests, no one must put himself forward and undertake, without our consent and election, to do what is in the power of all of us. For what is common to all, no one dare take upon himself without the will and the command of the community.26

The universal priesthood also meant any believer could baptize in a pinch: “In cases of necessity any one [sic] can baptize and give absolution, which would be impossible unless we were all priests.”27 Or interpret Scripture: “An ordinary man may have true understanding; why then should we not follow him” against any errors of popes or bishops?28 Or reprove the pope or any erring Christian: “But if I am to accuse him before the Church, I must bring the Church together.”29

Yarnell observes that early Luther—prior to the 1524 Peasants’ Rebellion—was even more radical than the early Particular Baptist. He demonstrates by placing some of Martin Luther’s 1523 statements side by side with statements from the 1644 and 1677 Baptist confessions.30 Where Luther said, “the ministry of the Word is common to all Christians,” the 1644 Baptist Confession says, “such to whom God hath given gifts, being tried by the Church, may and ought by the appointment of the Congregation, to prophesie.” Where Luther said “the second function [of the priesthood is], to baptize,” the 1677 Confession instructs, “these holy appointments are to be administered by those only, who are qualified and thereunto called.”

Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck also observed that every believer possesses an office, and even tied that office to the institutional church: “And just as all believers have a gift, so also they all hold an office. Not only in the church as organism but also in the church as institution, they have a calling and a task laid on them by the Lord.” He continues:
Antecedent to the special office of overseer and caretaker for the poor [deacon], therefore is the universal office of believers. After all, where two or three come together in his name, there Christ is in their midst (Matt. 18:19-20). He acquired for everyone the Holy Spirit, who dwells in all believers as his temple (Acts 2:22; 1 Cor. 6:19; Eph. 2:22; and so forth), so that they, being anointed with that Spirit, are [made] a holy, royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:5, 9). They are prophets who declare the excellencies of God, confess his name, and know all things (Matt. 10:32; 1 John 2:20, 27); priests who offer up their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God (Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:16; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10); kings who fight the good fight, overcome sin, the world, and death, and will someday reign with Christ (Rom. 6:12-13; 1 Tim. 1:18-19; 2 Tim. 2:12; 4:7; 1 John 2:13-14; Rev. 1:6, 2:26; 3:21; 20:6); and therefore they bear the name Christians, “anointed ones’ (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16). This prophetic, priestly, and royal activity of believers may properly be called the exercise of an office. 31

Likewise, James Bannerman, who represents the high watermark of nineteenth century Scottish Presbyterianism, does not use the language of office like Bavinck does. Instead, he speaks in the language of church power, and argues that “the whole body of believers must have within themselves all power competent to carry on the necessary functions and offices of a Church.”32 If the pastors of a church suddenly died (“become extinct”), the members of the church are able “to put forth their power to restore the office by their own authority, and at their own hands” (italics original). 33 The whole congregation’s right to church power, Bannerman says, “must ultimately be traced back to the right which every believer is invested with, in consequence of his union to Christ and adoption into the family of God.”34 Church privilege and power both root in the fact that we are adopted as sons of God. “In the charter of his many privileges as a son of God, there is likewise written down the right of every believer to Church power along with his other rights.”35 In other words, ecclesiology acknowledges the priestly and kingly list—or charter, to use Bannerman’s word.

**Church Authority**

So even in the movement from the doctrine of the royal priesthood to the doctrine of the church, many non-Baptists say all the correct things, from
a Baptist perspective. The problem, a Baptist would say, is that others don’t actually practice what they preach about the priesthood. Or rather, they find ways to fire church members from the responsibilities given them by Jesus. To see this, we need to push a little further into the nature of church authority. The idea of church authority has always been a slightly mystifying one for Protestants. We don’t want to say a church has the authority actually to make or unmake a Christian, whether through the ordinances or in some other fashion. What, then, is church authority for? What does it do? It was uncertainty over the answer to such questions which split the formative and fragmentary traditions in Baptist history. With the fragmentary tradition, we have a strong conviction that the individual Christian must finally heed his or her conscience over and against a church should a church ever defy Scripture. Each believer will give an individual account to King Jesus on Judgment Day, and so each believer must, in the final analysis, decide for him- or herself what biblical obedience requires. From these convictions emerge the impulses which animate the fragmentary tradition among Baptists and Protestants generally. At the same time, with the formative tradition, we know God has established in Scripture church officers as well as various accountability mechanisms such as church membership and discipline. With all this in mind, again, how do we view the nature of church authority?

Bannerman acknowledges that Scripture gives authority to both the church and its officers, and “both in accordance with their respective characters and places in Christian society.” Specifically, he believes the whole church will exercise its power by electing its officers. But other than that, he says, congregations should exercise power only in extraordinary situations. Ordinarily, elders exercise all power. And here he relies on an old Presbyterian distinction between the possession and exercise. The congregation possesses church power, he concedes, but the officers possess the right to exercise or administer that power. He illustrates this with the analogy of an eye seeing. The power to see belongs to the mind, but its exercise occurs in the eye.

This distinction between possession and exercise place Bannerman in a long line of Presbyterians who employed this same division. For instance, Scottish Presbyterian George Gillespie said that there is a difference “betwixt the power it self [sic], and the execution of it.” Referring to the keys of the kingdom in Matthew 18:18, Gillespie observed, “The power of binding and loosing, pertaineth to every particular Church collectively taken. But the
execution and judiciall exercing of this power, pertaineth to that company and assembly of Elders in every Church.” For Gillespie, this same congregational authority extended to ordination: Christ “hath also delivered unto the whole Church, power to call & ordaine Ministers for using the keyes ... because the Ministers which shee now hath, may faile.” In the elders or presbytery, then, “the Church consisteth representative.” Another nineteenth century Presbyterian, Thomas Peck, agreed with this basic way of characterizing the two roles: “The power resides in the body as to its being; in the officers as to its exercise.” And today the Presbyterian Church of America’s Book of Church Order affirms (1) that Christ vests all church power “in the whole body, the rulers and those ruled” (3.1); (2) that “This power, as exercised by the people, extends to the choice of those officers whom He has appointed in His church” (3.1); but that (3), once elected, the “officers exercise” that power (3.2) such that it has a “divine sanction” (3.6). Also, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church’s Book of Church Order employs the same categories and makes the same claims. In short, Bannerman represents only one stream of Presbyterians, though it is a prominent stream, and perhaps the more common stream today.

Presbyterians are not the only ones to hold this view. Low-church, evangelical Anglicans affirm the priesthood of all believers and therefore the necessity of involving the church in “discerning and ratifying” the leaders. They use slightly different arguments, such as the claim that an ordained minister is not of the church’s esse (essence) but only its bene esse (benefit). As such, he is “an instrument and a steward” of church authority. “The ordained ministry subserves the ministry of all the people,” and to “distance this ministry in any way from the local people would harm the local community.”

Baptists, however, are unsatisfied with these arguments. They agree with their Presbyterian brethren that congregations exercise power by electing elders. But can the congregation then dismiss those elders? Bannerman does not appear to make any provision for it. And if the power exercised by the elders cannot be taken back, the congregation does not actually possess it.

John Smyth employs the same distinction between possession and exercise (more than I would), even calling the congregation’s possession “nominal.” Still, he insists the congregation must be able to take it back:
'The brethren joyntly have all powre both of the Kingdom & preisthood immediately from Christ & that by vertue of the covenant God maketh with them.' But in spite of the gift of this power to and its nominal retention by the congregation, elders normally exercise ‘the publique actions of the Church, eyther of the Kingdom or preisthood’ on its behalf. Moreover, ‘the presbytery hath no powre, but what the Church hath & giveth vnto it: which the Church vppon just cause can take away.’

To understand the nature of church authority biblically, it’s worth returning once again to Jeremiah 31:34: “No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least to the greatest of them” (Jer. 31:34). God’s people would no longer be dependent on the offices of temple priest or Davidic king in order to know God. These two offices would collapse back upon every covenant member because everyone would have direct and equal access to God and to the knowledge of him. No longer am I dependent upon you, nor you upon me, to act in a mediatory capacity, as one would have been with a Levitical priest in declaring someone “clean” through the spattered blood of a sacrifice. No longer are either of us dependent upon a special class of persons for a right knowledge of God. For this reason, early Luther spoke of the right of every Christian to judge doctrine. Later Protestants would abuse this, as in the fragmentary tradition. But there’s something fundamentally right about it if each of our consciences are beholden to the Word of God over and above any church or pastor.

How then do we keep from floating into radical individualism or other abuses of Luther’s individual-conscience exalting insights? Is there such a thing as church authority which addresses such excesses?

**Church Authority as Agreement**

The answer comes from Jesus. “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt 18:19–20). The idea of church authority does not need to mystify or scare us. It’s simple. To strip off all the layers and whittle it down to its barest minimum, church authority is nothing more or less than two or three people agreeing about the gospel. Church authority is a property of that agreement,
and this understanding of church authority is perfectly consonant with the idea that all believers are priests.

Suppose three Christians crawl onto a desert island after their cruise ship sinks. They discover one another, discover they share the same gospel, and agree to regularly gather as a church to read from their water-logged but rescued Bible and to take the Lord Supper together (albeit with coconut juice). By this action, this agreement, this judgment they bind one another with the keys of the kingdom. By this agreement, they form a church. Suppose then a fourth survivor walks up, claims to be a Christian, but describes Jesus merely as a great teacher. The first three would not agree with the fourth’s confession. They would not receive the fourth into their communion. And that refusal—that lack of agreement with the fourth—would be their exercise of church authority.

The ability to *gather in Jesus’ name* presupposes (i) an agreement with one another about the good news of Jesus, (ii) as well as an agreement that the other two persons possess genuine faith in the good news about Jesus. And right there, in those two points of agreement over a confession and the status of the confessors, we find the very heart and substance of church authority. It’s two or three or three-thousand agreeing that we’re talking about the same good news; agreeing that we’re all his followers.

With Luther and the fragmentary tradition, we must affirm that every individual possesses the right to judge doctrine. A Christian who remains in a church which teaches a false gospel will be held accountable by God for remaining and not objecting (2 Tim 4:3). That person should speak out and then leave if necessary. But the same is true in the other direction. With the formative tradition, we must affirm that no church is required to affirm everyone who calls him or herself a Christian as a Christian. In short, there must be agreement between the church and the individual, between the Christian and other Christians, in order for a church to exist.

Consider again what church authority is. It’s not the authority to make or unmake a Christian. It is a political or group-organizing authority. It allows the people of an invisible new covenant to become corporately visible, as I argued a few moments ago when relating the doctrines of the priesthood and the church. It enables Christians to “go public” together. That kind of language might sound too exclusive to contemporary ears, but doing away with it is nonsensical. Without it, there’s no baptism, no Lord’s Supper, no visible church on
earth. Administering a baptism requires two or three people to agree. Enjoying the Supper requires two or three people to agree. Being a visible “assembly” (which is what “church” means) requires two or three people to agree. And the authority of a church, once again, is that agreement. Without church authority, there is no group; there’s just a bunch of self-defining individuals.

Which means, by definition, an individual Christian cannot possess church authority, because church authority requires the agreement of two or three. Agreeing with oneself doesn’t do much to build a church.

Though church authority is a social necessity, church authority is not simply born of the sociological necessity for how groups must form, i.e. through agreeing with one another that they are a group. Rather, Jesus puts his own authorization behind the agreement in two ways. First, by referring to the agreement of “two or three” in Matthew 18:20 (as in verse 16), Jesus invokes a Jewish courtroom principle from Deuteronomy 19 that says two or three witnesses must agree in order to bring a legally binding charge. Yet now Jesus puts that old principle to new work. These two or three who agree now “legally” bind one another from the standpoint of his kingdom. They are “covenanted” together, as Baptists have long emphasized. The Old Testament judicial glue finds a fresh use: binding a church together.

Second, Jesus seals that agreement with the promise of his own presence. “Where this happens, I’m there. They have my seal of approval. They raise my flag. They represent me, just as the temple once represented God’s authority and presence.”

In the concept of church-authority-as-agreement, we find the bridge between the formative and fragmentary Baptist traditions. With the fragmentary tradition, understanding authority as a covenantal agreement roots authority back in the individual conscience and the individual’s unmediated access to God. With the formative tradition, it insists on the role of the church as an accountability structure for the gathering and the public naming of Christians. It leaves a role for church officers and teachers, as I’ll get to in a moment.

With the formative tradition, we can say that Christians, these new covenant priest-kings, must submit themselves to the authority of a church. With the fragmentary tradition, we can say that these priest-kings are not merely under the authority of a church, they are in it. They both possess and exercise it.

Insofar as Jesus places the heart of church authority in the agreement of
believers ("if two of you agree on earth about anything"), I prefer the 1644 London Baptist Confession's definition of a church to the 1689's. It defines a church as

*a company of visible saints, called and separated from the world, by the Word and the Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the gospel, being baptized into the faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement, in the practical enjoyment of the ordinances* (art. 33)

The 1689 dropped the phrase "by mutual agreement," which was unfortunate.

In the concept of church-authority-as-agreement, we also find the beginning of answer to Bannerman and all those who attempt to divide the possession of authority from the exercise of authority. Authority which cannot be exercised, I have already suggested, is not truly possessed. The relationship between congregational authority and elder authority is not possession versus exercise. It is *possession versus leading-in-the-use*. Elders instruct, equip, teach congregations how to use their authority well (cf. Eph 4:11-16). Consider Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:3. He announces his “judgment” on the man sleeping with his father’s wife. Does that mean the man is thereby removed from the church? No, the man must still be removed (v. 2, 5). To that end, he calls upon the church to pass “judgment” (v. 12). “Do as I do,” says the apostle. He leads the Corinthians congregation in how they use their authority. And if an apostle, how much more an elder. Elders or pastors lead congregations to use their authority wisely. They say, “Church, this way.”

**What’s on the List of Our Priest-King Responsibilities?**

The responsibilities of a priest-king extend to all of life because we’re called to image God in all of life. As I mentioned above, we offer spiritual sacrifices through our acts of obedience, prayers of petition, and service to the saints.

Yet a Baptist perspective departs from other Protestants by emphasizing the uniqueness of the church acting jointly. And here the most crucial actions are a church’s decisions about what the gospel is and who the members are. Our priestly authority is, perhaps, most manifest in our church’s decisions about the *what* and the *who* of the gospel. Church authority is not finally about budgets or buildings or staffing or Sunday School curriculum. It’s about
confessions and confessors, because this is how we mark off the temple, consecrate a people to the Lord, and maintain the line between clean and unclean, holy and unholy. And whoever possesses the authority to answer those questions possesses the most crucial authority in a church, because this is what makes a church a church. If all believers are priest-kings, if no one can teach his brother, “Know the Lord,” since all know the Lord apart from a class of mediators, it would seem they must be in agreement over a church’s confession and its confessors.

Again, this is exactly what we find in the NT. The apostles called Christians to work and watch over the temple of the NT, the church (1 Cor 3:16; cf. 6:19; 1 Pet 2:4–8). God in Christ specially dwells there (Matt 18:20). Every member of Christ’s universal church is responsible to keep the holy separated from the unholy in the church, therefore Paul treats every believer as a priest-king:

Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? … Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? … For we are the sanctuary of the living God, as God said: I will dwell among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be My people. Therefore, come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord; do not touch any unclean thing, and I will welcome you. (2 Cor 6:14–17)

Every Christian, as part of his or her priestly duties, is to keep watch over who belongs to the church and who doesn’t.

These church members, furthermore, are responsible to be fruitful and multiply and rule like kings. How? By going, making disciples, baptizing, and teaching (Matt 28:19-20). Everyman Adam’s job becomes every Christian and church member’s job. Christians are “ambassadors for Christ” who possess a “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18, 20).

Yet the NT treats believers as not only responsible for doing the work of a priest-king, but able to do it. Paul says the church has not been taught by human wisdom but by the Spirit (1 Cor 2:10–16). And John says that the saints have been anointed and don’t need a teacher (1 John 2:20, 27; see also Matt 23:8). In other words, the Holy Spirit indwells every believer, enabling him or her to separate the true gospel from a false gospel, or a true knowledge of God from a false knowledge. They are responsible to be Christ’s
priest-kings, and they are able.

One implication is that Christians are also responsible and able to affirm what counts as true doctrine. The apostle John therefore tells his readers (ordinary Christians) to “test the spirits,” which they do by determining if a spirit “confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (1 John 4:1-2). Peter wants to “develop a genuine understanding” among his readers (ordinary Christians) so that they can keep “guard” between false teaching and true (2 Peter 3:1-2; 17-18). And Paul admonished his readers (ordinary Christians) for listening to a wrong gospel in their churches (Gal 1:6-9). The saints don’t need a seminary degree to discern between good teaching and bad. They don’t need to be ordained. The Spirit of God and Scripture provide all the training they need.

A second implication is that Christians are both responsible and able to affirm who belongs to the gospel and to God. They should be able to assess one another’s professions of faith, which seems to be the expectation of both Jesus and Paul (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5; 2 Cor 2:6).

For all these reasons, Baptists have consistently affirmed regenerate church membership. Infants cannot enter into such agreements. And Baptists have consistently affirmed congregationalism. They believe the whole congregation should be involved not simply in affirming elders, but affirming every member who joins or leaves a church. The whole congregation should participate in any act of excommunication. And certainly, the whole church should have the final say on any documents which pertain to what the church believes. It is the congregation’s agreement on confessions and confessors which makes a church a church. And it’s this agreement which allows new covenant priest-kings to guard and protect the new covenant gospel over time.

**Conclusion**

Baptists, Presbyterians, and Anglicans build different ecclesiology not merely because they favor different NT ecclesiology proof texts. They also apprehend the demands of the whole Bible’s royal-priesthood storyline differently. Therefore, the Baptist, the Presbyterian, and the Anglican look down at the same priestly and kingly job description in the NT proof texts like 1 Peter 2:9, but only the Baptist says, “Looks like we should build a congregational, believers-only church.” The Baptist perspective on the priesthood
of believers, in other words, resounds in the claim that there is a match, a suited-ness, an alignment, between a Protestant understanding of the priesthood and Baptist ecclesiology. One feeds the other. Baptist theologian James Leo Garrett refers to the “important connection” between them. Baptist seminary president Danny Akin says they are “totally consistent.” The non-Baptist offers two lists: one for the priesthood, a slightly different one for members of the church.

Baptists believe, in other words, that the structures of a local church are not random or arbitrary, as if God might have chosen this or that structure, any of them potentially suited for organizing and overseeing churches. Rather, the inspired structures of the local church make sense in light of our royal priesthood, which in turn make sense in light of the nature of our salvation, as explained in Scripture’s covenantal storyline. The connection between a Protestant view of salvation and Baptist ecclesiology—Baptists dare to believe—is essentially organic, like an inevitable outgrowth. It’s coherent, like matching puzzle pieces. Baptist ecclesiology is the final and necessary step of the Protestant Reformation. We don’t claim to have contributed to the larger, more crucial battles over the nature of salvation. But we do claim to have learned the most from Luther’s recovery of the priesthood of believers for the nature and structure of the church. We see two witnesses to Baptist ecclesiology: the NT’s ecclesiology proof texts as well as the nature of our salvation and the royal and priestly obligations which follow it.

6 E.g. E. Y. Mullins, The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith (Boston: Griffith & Rowland
The Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei
23 See Kevin Vanhoozer’s useful discussion of the royal aspects of the royal priesthood, in Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 155-77, and especially the table on 216.
22 See Voss’s discussion of Karl Barth, Lesslie Newbigin, and John Howard Yoder. In The Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei, 155–77, and especially the table on 216.
17 The first sentence of chapter 1 of Oliver O’Donovan’s The Ways of Judgment reads, “The authority of secular government resides in the practice of judgment” (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 3.
16 See my survey of the literature on the philosophy of forgiveness, where forgiveness is sometimes defined by philosophers in terms of restoring people to the status quo ante, in Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ’s Rule (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 278-90.
15 See especially the work of G. K. Beale (e.g. The Temple and the Church’s Mission) or my extended discussion of this in Don’t Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 37–40; Political Church, 165-68; 183; 220; 223-24; etc.
14 Against Heresies, Bk 4, ch. 8, para. 3.
12 See especially the work of G. K. Beale (e.g. The Temple and the Church’s Mission) or my extended discussion of this in Don’t Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 37–40; Political Church, 165-68; 183; 220; 223-24; etc.
11 John H. Elliot argues that the word for priesthood in Exodus 19:6 refers to a “community” or “body” of priests and does not envision people acting individually as priests. See The Elect and the Holy: An Exegetical Examination of 1 Peter 2:4-10 and the Phrase basileion hierateuma, but see Hank Voss’s response in The Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei: A Canonical, Catholic, and Contextual Perspective (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 40-41.
10 Quote taken from Tim Bradshaw (not his own position), The Olive Branch: An Evangelical Anglican Doctrine of the Church (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1992), 63.
9 See the useful discussion of these errors in Uche Anizor & Hank Voss, Representing Christ: A Vision for the Priesthood of All Believers, 1-65.
5 Ibid., 67.
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28 Ibid., 74.
29 Ibid., 76–77.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid, 282. Any astute readers who look up this quote will discover that it comes from his description of the position of the Independents. Yet Bannerman concedes earlier in the paragraph that these points can be “maintained” from Scripture; and his later description of his position affirms the same thing (see 285-88). I simply prefer the phrasing here, as with the language of “charter.”
36 Bannerman, The Church of Christ, 269.
37 Ironically, the congregationalists Thomas Goodwin and John Cotton both used this illustration centuries before to represent their position, Quoted in Powell, British Protestantism, 154–55.
38 Quoted in ibid., 38.
39 Quoted in ibid., 39. See the critiques of Gillespie by fellow Presbyterians John Ball and Samuel Rutherford (41–45; 48–53).
41 For an excellent discussion of this position both in the Book of Church Order and in Presbyterianism generally, see Waters, How Jesus Runs the Church, 58–63.
45 Bradshaw, The Olive Branch, 143–47, 158–69.
46 Ibid., 158–59.
47 In Yarnell, “Baptist Concepts of Royal Priesthood,” 239.
48 I discuss the relationship of congregational authority and elder authority at length in chapters 5 and 6 of Don’t Fire Your Church Members.