



LUTHER AND THE SAINTS

The Priesthood of All Believers – A True Treasure of the Lutheran Reformation

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Progression of Thought

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Introduction and Prayer Rationale for the Subtitle

Initial Interactive Scripture Review

The Treasure Revealed

The Spirit through the Scriptures encourages believers to hold firmly to Christ and to share in his glorious office. In exploring Luther, I submit that the title “priesthood of all believers” is an inclusive term for Luther, encompassing “the threefold office” of prophet, priest, and king. Such use reflects the nomenclature Luther grew up with in the church, but now he rediscovers how it emphasizes the grace and dignity we have in Christ.

The Rejected Treasure Recovered

A cursory evaluation of Roman teaching on authority and the ministry, especially in regard to their heresy of two classes of members in the church, will be contrasted with Luther’s clear appreciation for the Bible’s teaching on the priesthood of all believers. We focus especially on several writings of the early 1520s.

The Road to Recovering the Treasure and Beyond

A brief review of the background events leading up to the publication of the 1520 literary broadside in order to appreciate also how Luther clearly outlines a biblical approach to church and ministry issues. He emphasizes grace, faith, and Scripture in the hands of all Christians and immediately applies the ramifications of that truth.

The Treasure – Ours to Reclaim

An opportunity for each of us to examine our personal lives, our ministries, and our efforts in teaching another generation of God’s people the glorious reality that Christ declares us to be priests and kings and prophets—before God and to the world.

JESU JUVĀ

Introduction and Prayer Rationale for the Subtitle

My guess is that he took the train, although I have no proof. It seems logical to me, though. A century ago a trip of about 600 miles was quite an undertaking. The world war was still raging. There were no interstate highways or commercial jets. To travel from Wauwatosa to Norfolk required a considerable commitment of time and effort. Yet then, as often happens now, a district convention requested a seminary professor to address their assembly. It was the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. Professor August Pieper came to St. Paul's Lutheran Church in that Nebraskan town mentioned. During a time of suspicion and hostility toward German-Americans, he ventured forth to bring good news to delegates who no doubt had faced some ridicule for their ethnicity. Professor Pieper brought news of their identity in Christ, which could squelch whatever nervous fears their hearts harbored during that time of never-before-seen carnage overseas as well as stress and tension in hometown neighborhoods. They needed to be reminded of who they were in Christ and what glorious responsibilities he had graciously entrusted to them, even as they observed an event of four centuries prior.

The title of Pieper's presentation was "Luther's Teaching of the Christian Priesthood."¹ At the end of the very first paragraph of this work we read, "Our celebration of the 400th anniversary of the Reformation will be a curse for our church if it does not, first of all, drive us to our knees."² It is fitting and proper, then, to pause for prayer.

Heavenly Father, in Jesus' name, hear us. Forgive us for imagining we're better than other churches because we possess sound doctrine. Sound doctrine is indeed a priceless treasure, and the gospel in apostolic purity brings the power of the Spirit to human hearts. We praise your saving Name for such a gracious gift. Yet never let that wonderful truth allow us the Pharisaic presumption to think, "God, we thank you that we are not like the Methodists, the

¹ August Pieper, "Luther's Teaching of the Christian Priesthood." Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file. According to the translator, sainted professor John Jeske, the message was originally spoken, not printed and read. The assembly heard it delivered in the German language. Again, consider the tenor of the times! Perhaps, and I stress the speculation on my part, this talk at Norfolk was a result of another 400th anniversary project of Professor Pieper. During 1917 and 1918, Pieper published a series of articles in three succeeding issues of the *Theologische Quartalschrift*. The series was entitled *Luther's Lehre von Kirche und Amt*, and is now printed in English translation as "Luther's Doctrine of Church and Ministry." This essay is found in *The Wauwatosa Theology*, volume III (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 141-206. Both resources are valuable reviews of the heterodox teachings of the papacy related to this topic, with the latter resource much more exhaustive.

² *Ibid.*, 1.

Baptists, or those poor Roman Catholics.” We are unworthy of the gospel of grace entrusted to us. We have failed to use it with gratitude and zeal. Forgive us, in the name of your Son. Renew and refresh our souls with your peace. Empower us to remain faithful with the Word entrusted to us. Bless our observance of this 500th anniversary, so that eyes and hearts remain ever focused on your Son, the Christ of God. Amen.³

The subtitle of this paper is a direct allusion to the Norfolk presentation where Pieper said, “I would like to present the treasure of the Reformation. This is the concept which the greatest man of the Lutheran church in this country, Dr. Walther, introduced in order to identify the essence of Lutheranism: the teaching of *the priesthood of all believers*” (italics in the original).⁴ I did not take the time to do an exhaustive search for this Walther quote, and I leave it to an interested reader as an opportunity for continued study. Pieper goes on to say, “From Luther, Walther drew his understanding of this doctrine and set it down in his writings, particularly *Of Church and Ministry* and *The True Form* . . . This teaching is absolutely priceless, for it teaches us what God has given his church as its inner glory and as the basis for its holy character.”⁵ In this paper I will attempt to defend and expand upon this idea that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is indeed a tremendous treasure of the Reformation, pointing us to Christ and what he has given us.

Initial Interactive Scripture Review

On the next page I will list seven Scriptures often connected with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. I will allow four minutes for you to silently read the verses and fill out the chart below the verses. When I announce it, you will then be given another four minutes to compare and contrast your responses with those of a neighbor near you. Can you synthesize your thoughts into two or three agreed upon truths/themes about the priesthood of all believers?

³The prayer is crafted using many of the thoughts and phrases from Pieper’s introductory comments in his Norfolk presentation. *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

Exodus 19

⁴“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

Isaiah 61

⁶And you will be called priests of the LORD,
you will be named ministers of our God.
You will feed on the wealth of nations,
and in their riches you will boast.

1 Peter 2

⁴As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— ⁵you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . . ⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Revelation 1

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

Revelation 3

²¹To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Revelation 5

¹⁰“You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.”

Revelation 20

⁶Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

List three or four key truths enumerated in these verses related to the subtitle of this paper.



List two or three agreed upon truths in collaboration with your neighbor.



The Treasure Revealed

From youth on, everyone present in this assembly has probably heard the phrase “the universal priesthood of all believers” as a title for the key Reformation truth assigned for our study together. Often it is shortened to “the priesthood of all Christians,” and for good reason. The status of priesthood is a gift to those in whom the Spirit creates saving faith in the work of Christ. However, not all believe in Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice as the only payment for sin. For those who reject the Great High Priest’s sacrifice, Christ is a stumbling stone.⁶ Consequently, as Professor Brug pointed out, a more precise terminology would eliminate “universal” from the title of the doctrine.⁷

One might wonder: What phrase did Luther use most often to describe this truth? There is discussion among some scholars that Luther never “codified” a title for the doctrine.⁸ Yet there is no mistaking that Luther clearly taught the concept, and did it often. In his sermon on 1 Peter 2, he writes, “These three offices He also gave to all of us. Consequently, since He is the Priest and we are His brothers, all Christians have the authority, the command, and the obligation to preach, to come before God, to pray for one another, and to offer themselves as a sacrifice to God.”⁹

As we journey together through a few of his writings, please note how often Luther uses the terminology of priest or priesthood in an inclusive manner. It is probably not surprising, since—as we shall notice later in the paper—the Roman church divided the office of the priest into three responsibilities of prophet, priest, and king. Such usage would be natural for Luther, though he would assert that those responsibilities are given by God to all Christians, not just the clergy.

⁶ 1 Peter 2:7-8: *Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,” and, “A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.”*

⁷ “For this reason ‘the priesthood of all believers’ is a more apt name for this office than the often-used ‘universal priesthood.’” John Brug, “The Priesthood of All Believers and the Ministry.” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file.

⁸ Dr. Nagel begins a paper on this subject with the following questions: “Was there a ‘priesthood of all believers’ before there was a Luther? Did he invent it, or did he name it? Did he ever in fact use this expression?” Norman Nagel, “Luther and the Priesthood of All Believers,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, volume 61 (October 1997), 277-298. Another author writes, “There were no references to this phrase anywhere in Luther’s own writings – that is to say, *Das allgemeine Priestertum aller Gläubigen* (the common priesthood of all believers), in all of its Latin and German permutations, was nowhere to be found in Luther’s writings.” Timothy Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops: Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 1.

⁹ Martin Luther, “Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter,” *Luther’s Works*, volume 30 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 54.

Luther acknowledges the reality that a baptized Christian has been united into Christ, and thus shares in Christ's threefold office. Though he uses the term *priest* most frequently, Luther also speaks of the other aspects of the threefold office: prophet and king.

As we begin our study of Christ and his threefold office, Scripture is clear that Christ alone perfectly fulfilled what God decreed for his role as the Anointed One. There is only one perfect prophet, raised up according to God's promise through Moses.¹⁰ This perfect prophet was the only prophet *powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.*¹¹ There is only one perfect and great high priest: *Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.*¹² Christ offered a perfect propitiatory sacrifice that need never be repeated.¹³ And there is only one eternal King, who *will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations, a king who will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.*¹⁴ This is the King of whom Scripture declares, *he will reign forever and ever.*¹⁵ And this Jesus *is the same yesterday and today and forever.*¹⁶ That means Christ remains in his threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. "Christ never discarded or abdicated or transferred His priestly office to anybody else. He is and remains the true Priest before God."¹⁷ And this true priest, having redeemed us with his blood, gives us new birth through baptism. Baptism unites us to Jesus so that he graciously declares us priests and kings and prophets. "In His own person Christ is indeed the only High Priest between God and us all. Nevertheless He has bestowed this name on us, too, so that we who believe in Him are

¹⁰ *The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him."* Dt. 18:17-18.

¹¹ Luke 24:19.

¹² Hebrews 7:24-27.

¹³ *Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.* Hebrews 9:28.

¹⁴ Psalm 72:5,8.

¹⁵ Revelation 11:15.

¹⁶ Hebrews 13:8.

¹⁷ Martin Luther, "Commentary on Psalm 110," *Luther's Works*, volume 13 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 330.

also priests, just as we are called Christians after Him.”¹⁸ “Consequently, every baptized Christian is a priest already, not by appointment or ordination from the pope or any other man, but because Christ Himself has begotten him as a priest and has given birth to him in Baptism.”¹⁹

And what is true for the office of priest, so also for every aspect of the office of Christ. In the quote on page seven, we see Luther allude to the function of the prophet when he says, “all Christians have the authority, the command, and the obligation to preach . . .”²⁰ Later in the same work, Luther is more specific when he comments on the apostle’s phrase, *declaring the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*²¹

A priest must be God’s messenger and must have a command from God to proclaim His Word. You must, says Peter, exercise the chief function of a priest, that is, to proclaim the wonderful deed God has performed for you to bring you out of darkness into the light. And your preaching should be done in such a way that one brother proclaims the mighty deed of God to the other, how you have been delivered through Him from sin, hell, death, and all misfortune, and have been called to eternal life. Thus you should also teach other people how they, too, come into such light. For you must bend every effort to realize what God has done for you. Then let it be your chief work to proclaim this publicly and to call everyone into the light into which you have been called. Where you find people who do not know this, you should instruct and also teach them as you have learned, namely, how one must be saved through the power and strength of God and come out of darkness into the light.²²

Per the verses from the Revelation of St. John that you read privately, you also see the office of king alluded to. Christians are declared kings, and *they will reign on the earth . . . and will reign with him for a thousand years.*²³ In Luther’s writing to the Bohemians²⁴ regarding church and ministry issues we read this: “That we are his brethren is true only because of the new birth. Wherefore we are priests, as he is Priest, sons as he is Son, kings as he is King. For he makes us to sit with him in heavenly places, as companions and co-heirs with him, in whom and with whom all things are given us. And many similar expressions indicate our oneness with Christ—

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 329.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 329.

²⁰ Luther, “Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter,” 54.

²¹ Peter 2:9.

²² Luther, “Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter,” 64-65.

²³ Revelation 5:10 and Revelation 20:6.

²⁴ It would be beneficial background to read the introduction to “Concerning the Ministry.” The succinct background summary explains how priests in Bohemia would go to Rome for ordination and promise to administer communion in only one kind. Then, when these priests returned home, they would recant the vow before the local authorities and promise to administer the Sacrament in both kinds, as Christians in Bohemia had done since the time of Hus. Luther was encouraged to write to them. “Concerning the Ministry” discusses the authority of the priesthood of all Christians to call and set apart their priests without the need for apostolic succession.

one loaf, one cup, one body, members of his body, one flesh, bone of his bone, and we are told we have all things in common with him [Rom. 8:32; Gal. 3:28; I Cor. 10:17; Eph. 4:4; 5:30].²⁵

I confess that in my teaching and preaching in the parish, I often “sliced the pie” of Christ’s office for ease of teaching, and presented Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King. But I was not always careful to emphasize the one office. Yet the catechism is careful to speak of Christ’s office, not his offices. In my view I think that Luther speaks of Christ’s priestly office in a similar manner, one office but also having the various responsibilities of prophet and king. “He must be the only one, who brings us to God by His priestly office and shares the office with us. Just as we are all comforted and saved by the power of His priestly office, so all who are saved share in it . . . He also bestows the title upon all Christians. As they are called God’s children and heirs for His sake, so they are called priests after Him. Every baptized Christian is, and ought to be, called a priest . . .”²⁶ Luther reflects this inclusive approach in his writing. In the lengthy quote that follows, notice how Luther delineates yet integrates the concept of a believer being declared both king and priest.

The nature of this priesthood and kingship is something like this: First, with respect to the kingship, every Christian is by faith so exalted above all things that, by virtue of a spiritual power, he is lord of all things without exception, so that nothing can do him any harm. As a matter of fact, all things are made subject to him and are compelled to serve him in obtaining salvation. Accordingly, Paul says... in I Cor. 3 [:21-23], “All things are yours whether . . . life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ’s. . . .”

The power of which we speak is spiritual. It rules in the midst of enemies and is powerful in the midst of oppression. This means nothing else than that “power is made perfect in weakness” [2 Cor. 12:9] and that in all things I can find profit toward salvation [Rom. 8:28], so that the cross and death itself are compelled to serve me and to work together with me for my salvation. This is a splendid privilege and hard to attain, a truly omnipotent power, a spiritual dominion in which there is nothing so good and nothing so evil but that it shall work together for good to me, if only I believe.

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.²⁷

²⁵ Martin Luther, “Concerning the Ministry,” *Luther’s Works*, volume 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 20, *passim*.

²⁶ Luther, “Commentary on Psalm 110,” 330.

²⁷ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” *Luther’s Works*, volume 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 354-355, *passim*.

Oh, what gospel comfort these terms bring the troubled soul. Indeed, God’s gospel declarations touch the heart with the reality of how objective justification impacts my relationship with God and my views of personal identity and meaningful purpose in life. *This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.*²⁸ God declares us not guilty, justified, innocent—thanks be to Christ. And with this justification we are declared to be *immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.*²⁹ What does God say to you?

You are Abraham’s seed. Ga. 3:29

You are an heir. Ga. 3:29; 4:7

You are the light of the world. Mt. 5:14

You are a chosen people. 1 Pt. 2:9

You are a holy nation. 1 Pt. 2:9

You are the body of Christ. 1 Cor. 12:27

You are God’s child. Ga. 4:7

You are the salt of the earth. Mt. 5:13

You are my witnesses. Is. 44:8

You are a royal priesthood. 1 Pt. 2:9

You are a people belonging to God. 1 Pt. 2:9

Each of these titles is a sermon waiting to be written!

Some of these titles reflect a glorious relationship with the Almighty; some reflect the glorious privilege he has given to those baptized into the name of Christ. All reflect amazing grace. The list can bring a sinner’s heart to tears—tears of contrition, tears of joy. Do we see what God says about us and compare that with how we personally view ourselves? Is there a vast gulf? Though we are free in Christ, our old natures remain chained to guilt. Perhaps you have thought, “Your child? How can I be? You see the angry temper tantrums hidden in my heart when the cares of ministry have me echo your servant of old: *I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me.*³⁰ Perhaps we think, “I’m part of a chosen people? Then why am I ostracized when people learn I’m a Bible-believing Christian who happens to be a pastor?” Oh, how Satan seeks to cover our eyes so we don’t see the nameplates the Lord Jesus has attached to our hearts through baptism. Remember the truth: *For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ.*³¹ Believe what God says you are, not what you think or feel about yourself!

²⁸ Romans 3:22-25.

²⁹ Ephesians 3:20.

³⁰ Numbers 11:14.

³¹ 2 Corinthians 1:20.

Washed clean by the blood of the Lamb, every Christian has those titles. Every Christian is now a priest of God, offering our *bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship*.³² Never is there to be a priest of God offering a polluted sacrifice: *Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness*.³³ Every Christian now a priest, praying continually,³⁴ making requests and intercessions and prayers and thanksgiving for everyone.³⁵ Every Christian a prophet, always ready to give an answer to anyone wondering why we have such hope and joy.³⁶ Every Christian a king in Christ Jesus, *more than conquerors through him who loved us*.³⁷

This teaching is not new with Luther, nor even with the New Testament. Is this “priesthood of believers” not reflected by the saints of old as they demonstrated their identity and their life’s purpose? Permit a brief recount of several examples as illustrative of the reality that believers of old followed the apostle’s understanding of the role of good works—*I will show you my faith by what I do*³⁸—and thus lived the office of priest, bringing their lives and bodies as the living sacrifices referenced above.

Abel brought the best and offered it to the Lord as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. We know it was not a sacrifice done to merit God’s attention, for that would be an act of unbelief, and Scripture declares, *without faith it is impossible to please God*.³⁹ Luther commented, “But in the church nothing at all counts unless the person first be acceptable, as Abel was, and he was in God’s favor not by sacrifice, but by faith and spirit.”⁴⁰ Who taught Abel so to do? It was the Spirit’s work. The Spirit created faith in Abel’s heart to believe in the coming Seed of the Woman, the Seed born to be the Crusher of the serpent. The Spirit moved an individual to take of his

³² Romans 12:1.

³³ Romans 6:13.

³⁴ Confer 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

³⁵ Confer 1 Timothy 2:1.

³⁶ Confer 1 Peter 3:15.

³⁷ Romans 8:37.

³⁸ James 2:18.

³⁹ Hebrews 11:6.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, “Concerning the Ministry,” *Luther’s Works*, volume 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 29.

vocational labors and act as a priest, coming to the Lord dressed in his promises and bringing a thank-offering to reflect the heart's gratitude. In so doing, he sent a powerful sermon to his brother, a sermon that ignited hostility, which is always the case in the heart of natural man, *because the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.*⁴¹

Consider Seth, of whom it is said, *At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD.*⁴² Believers at that time, and no doubt Seth himself, exercised the priesthood of all believers. A careful look at the Hebrew construction will show an identical usage in Exodus 33:19, which indicates that believers were both acting as priest and as prophet, proclaiming and praying as witness to the world.⁴³ Noah is well known for his construction abilities. Did he not perhaps thus display a role as prophet, his deeds matching his words about God's gracious warning of impending judgment? The Spirit calls him *a preacher of righteousness.*⁴⁴ Later, his first act after leaving the ark was to serve as a priest to the Lord in the presence of his family, offering a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

We come to the father of believers. Terah's son was visited by the true LORD and called away from idol worship. Abraham was given amazing promises and a guarantee of the LORD's own divine GPS to take him to a special place. Abraham, too, *called on the name of the Lord.*⁴⁵ He built altars. He interceded with the LORD. He offered sacrifices. His was an intimate relationship with the Savior God who promised that kings would come from his line. Yet was what he did unique? Inwardly, yes, for his actions flowed from faith in the promises. But outwardly, perhaps not so much. People all around did religion. The remnant of the truth that was rotting in hard hearts brought forth corrupt imitations, all screaming an *opinio legis* worship that only leads to the lake of fire. Unbelievers did build altars, offered sacrifices, conducted rituals. Yet such hearts

⁴¹ Romans 8:7-8.

⁴² Genesis 4:26.

⁴³ Exodus 33:19 reads, *And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and **I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence.**"* The words in bold are the same words used in Genesis 4:26, except there translated as "to call on the name of the LORD." The Hebrew is קרא בשם. See also Exodus 34:6-7 where God gives a "sermon" on his name. There is a similar but not identical phrase there.

⁴⁴ 2 Peter 2:5.

⁴⁵ Genesis 12:8; 13:4; 21:33.

were not inhabited by the Spirit, for the motive and purpose was to earn God's glance of favor and avert his wrath over those deeds that plagued the smitten conscience. No doubt there were many—then and now—who lived as the holy writer declared, *having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.*⁴⁶

Fast forward to Mount Sinai. God speaks to a whole nation. The LORD first reminds them of his grace and his power to rescue: *You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*⁴⁷ God then has Moses consecrate them, and they were to wash their clothes because the Lord would come down to them. God sets them apart as a nation through which all the nations around would witness the priests of the true God, a nation living a different lifestyle of prayer and praise and confidence in the ultimate deliverance that God gives his people from the troubles and sufferings of life. The nation was set apart to serve the world with the truth in word and deed. They were to act as a magnet, drawing the nations to the glory of the Holy One of Israel.

But from the nation, individuals also were set apart as distinct. The Old Testament ceremonial worship, a shadow of things to come, would also foreshadow the glorious reality of the priesthood of all believers.⁴⁸ The people saw essential truths about sin separating them from the holy God, and no one could come near. They saw the need for a mediator and the need for blood to cover sin and restore the relationship with God. These were *a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*⁴⁹ So those chosen by God through lineage were washed, anointed, dressed in linen, and set apart. Even here we find a shadow within a shadow, and we see both realities. We are completely free to enter the holy place, to serve as priests, to proclaim in word and deed the *praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*⁵⁰ We too have been washed. *Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his*

⁴⁶ 2 Timothy 3:5.

⁴⁷ Exodus 19:4-6.

⁴⁸ A helpful resource to explore this section more deeply is authored by L.W. Spitz, "The Universal Priesthood of Believers," *The Abiding Word*, volume 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1946), 321-341.

⁴⁹ Colossians 2:17.

⁵⁰ 1 Peter 2:9.

*name.*⁵¹ We too have been dressed. *For all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.*⁵² We too have been anointed. *Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*⁵³ Baptism! What a glorious gift. No wonder Luther exclaims, *We are all consecrated priests through baptism.*⁵⁴

The Rejected Treasure Recovered

While reading several works that I thought would elucidate Luther’s mindset regarding “the saints,” I kept remembering two events in my life as metaphors for the choking cloud of heresy that suffocated the visible church at Luther’s time. The first event is over 15 years ago. Landing in Chennai, India, for the first time, I was almost asleep on my feet. It had been an exhausting trip of flight delays and missed connections and rebookings. The fatigue magnified the sensory overload of crowds and heat and smells. One smell in particular I still occasionally experience, and it takes me back immediately. It is the smell of diesel fuel. Every vehicle in that city of over seven million ran on diesel—from the “tuk tuks” to cars and taxis and the ever present “lorry.” As a child, the smell of diesel often brought me car sickness. Still today it turns my stomach. And in the tropical heat of a huge city, the diesel fumes seemed to invade my lungs, my pores, my taste buds. Oh, for a breath of clean air! Several years later I literally saw what I had smelled. A different Asian city, huge and infamous for smog. I was in that city for about ten days to teach a course. It was January, crisp and breezy, and the air quality was amazingly good. Until the day I flew out. From my window seat I watched as a huge brown blanket of smog began to settle on the vast city. Stark contrasts of blue sky and fresh air, with the brown layer that dimmed the sun and despoiled the lungs. If you are a lifelong resident of either city, pollution becomes the norm. Perhaps you grab a mask and carry on, but in essence you adjust. You can’t imagine an atmosphere so clean that you could inhale the fresh air and experience your body recharged.

⁵¹ Acts 22:16.

⁵² Galatians 3:27.

⁵³ 2 Corinthians 1:21-22.

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” *Luther’s Works*, volume 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 127.

Why this metaphoric excursus? By God's grace most, if not all, of us have lived our entire lives in the clean air of sound doctrine and the joy of personal Scripture study to "open the window" on our conscience and let the gospel refresh and reinvigorate us in Christ. I do not think any of us can fathom the life-sapping theological pollution that permeated and penetrated every aspect of medieval life in Luther's time and in Luther's land. The only entity that carried the name "Christian" was a furnace billowing heresy⁵⁵ that blinded souls. Few could see the glory of grace, the joy of Christ's triumph on our behalf, and the total gospel freedom in the believer's life of witness and worship. Where does one start to enumerate the errors? The idolatry of venerating Mary and adoring the saints? Submitting the interpretation of the Spirit's inspired Word to the whimsies of tradition or the vagaries of pontiffs? Indulgences and relics and pilgrimages? The blasphemy of the Mass? Indelible character? Treasury of merit and works of supererogation? On and on it could go, and still does to this day. *Papam esse ipsum verum antichristum*.⁵⁶ Yet, in contrast, consider the omnipotence of the Spirit! He still preserved souls in the arms of the Savior through parts of the liturgy, as they heard and recited the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, etc. Still, there remained an "Israel within Israel."

For this paper I will highlight how the treasure of the priesthood of all Christians was rejected by looking briefly at several writings from the early 1520s. In these works, Luther opens the windows of Scripture to allow the breath of the Spirit to bring clarity to hearts and minds and thus vivify burdened souls. Luther indeed addresses numerous heretical teachings and practices throughout these writings. However, it is necessary to limit our discussion. We focus on the false distinction perpetuated by the Roman church, one that effectively entombed the priesthood of all believers under manmade fallacy. Presenting elements of these works will, by contrast, then expose just how hardened the rejection of the treasure had become.

In 1520 the treatise "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate" was published. The title itself identifies a critical issue.⁵⁷ One author

⁵⁵ *The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss.* Revelation 9:1-2.

⁵⁶ "The pope is very truly the antichrist."

⁵⁷ The English word "estate" is used to translate the word *Stand*. Perhaps a more colloquial rendering could be "walk of life," as suggested by Wengert below.

explains the impact of the title this way. “More generally, in Luther’s day, everyone knew that in the church itself there were two estates, two *Stände*, the worldly (or secular) “walk of life” and the spiritual (including priests, bishops, and monastics). Yet in the title of the tract, Luther has done a remarkable thing, namely, spoken of a single Christian estate: “*des Christlichen Standes*.” Luther, already in the title, has reduced the Christian *Stand*, or walk of life, to a single one.”⁵⁸

In this work, Luther identifies three “walls” the Roman church has built in order to isolate themselves against charges of error. He writes:

In the first place, when pressed by the temporal power they have made decrees and declared that the temporal power had no jurisdiction over them, but that, on the contrary, the spiritual power is above the temporal. In the second place, when the attempt is made to reprove them with the Scriptures, they raise the objection that only the pope may interpret the Scriptures. In the third place, if threatened with a council, their story is that no one may summon a council but the pope.⁵⁹

The first wall is a foundational wall that props up the entire edifice of error.⁶⁰ According to Roman doctrine, Christ established two estates, or “walks of life,” in the church. One estate is the common people, and the other estate is the clergy. The clergy is given the threefold office of priest, prophet, and king, which defines all-encompassing powers out of the reach of a common Christian.

The *potestas ordinis* (the power of the orders—the ordained office⁶¹) confers upon the priest the authority to administer the sacraments and to celebrate the Mass, which the Romans teach to be “a real atoning sacrifice, by which the bloody sacrifice of Christ on the cross should be repeated in an unbloody manner every day. Through consecration, prayer, and elevation of the same to

⁵⁸ Timothy Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops: Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 5.

⁵⁹ Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate,” *Luther’s Works*, volume 44, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 126.

⁶⁰ Professor Pieper provides the reader a thorough road map to navigate the maze of Roman heresy. Much of this section is a summary of Pieper, and I commend it to you for further study since at its heart, the Roman church has not changed the essential doctrines codified by Trent. August Pieper, “Luther’s Doctrine of Church and Ministry,” *op. cit.*, 150-154.

⁶¹ Pieper, *ibid.*, 151, quotes the Council of Trent, which identified seven “orders,” of which the highest order is the priest.

God, Christ himself is sacrificed to God.”⁶² In Roman thinking, this public priesthood is given to only certain people, those who have the apostolic succession through the laying on of hands. The *potestas magisterii* (the power of the teaching office) is the prophetic office. Like the office of priest, it is an authority given to the apostles and their successors via the laying on of hands. A priest teaches with authority and infallibility. Lay Christians can share the Word and tell others, but that is a private matter, and they are prone to error. The *potestas jurisdictionis* (the power of the judicial office) is the royal office. The priest can create laws for people even beyond God’s revealed law, thus, prescribing conduct. The priest can evaluate the life of a person and pass judgment, either condemning or absolving. The priest also, then, can announce penance, which must be done to make satisfaction for the wrongdoing. (Consider the confessional booth.)

For Luther there was to be no separation of God’s people into two castes. “. . . all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 [12-13] that we are all one body, yet every member has its own work by which it serves the others. This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people.”⁶³ Understanding the truth of justification and the power of baptism underscores the truth—radical for the time—that the Christian laity in their status before God are equal to the clergy. Luther is insistent. “That is why in cases of necessity anyone can baptize and give absolution. This would be impossible if we were not all priests. Through canon law the Romanists have almost destroyed and made unknown the wondrous grace and authority of baptism and justification.”⁶⁴ “For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop, and pope, although of course it is not seemly that just anybody should exercise such office.”⁶⁵ “It follows from this argument that there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do.”⁶⁶

⁶² Pieper, *ibid.*, 151.

⁶³ Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” 127.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

Please permit one more quote from this important monograph of Luther's. "This is the teaching of St. Paul in Romans 12 [:4-5] and 1 Corinthians 12 [:12] and in 1 Peter 2 [:9], as I have said above, namely, that we are all one body of Christ the Head, and all members one of another. Christ does not have two different bodies, one temporal, the other spiritual. There is but one Head and one body. Therefore, just as those who are now called 'spiritual,' that is, priests, bishops, or popes, are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the Word of God and the sacraments, which is their work and office, so it is with the temporal authorities. They bear the sword and rod in their hand to punish the wicked and protect the good."⁶⁷

Such good news about the status of the laity as equal before God through Christ's work had an immediate impact. People who had entered monastic communities, thinking this was more pleasing to God as a way of life, began to rethink the decision and perhaps to see its error, for it was based upon a work-righteous theology. Regardless, some had left the monasteries. Others, though, perhaps, felt coerced into such action. Luther was concerned that no one go against his conscience. So one year after the publication of "To the Christian Nobility," Luther penned a lengthy treatise, not as a polemical work, but as a help and guide to individuals pondering such a course of action. The book was entitled "Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows."⁶⁸ In it Luther used a variety of arguments from Scripture and reason to overturn the Roman view of monastic vows. In so doing, he also dealt with the biblical view of Christian life versus the divided view common to the church at the time. Naturally, this article would fit better in the next section, but permit a quote from it that demonstrates again how the treasure of the priesthood of all believers had been rejected by the church: "There is another article of their unbelief: they divide the Christian life into a state of perfection and a state of imperfection. To the common people, they ascribe a life of imperfection; to themselves, a life of perfection."⁶⁹

The treasure of the priesthood of all believers was rejected in the church, with error upon error covering the truth. Entangled with this falsehood of two classes of members in the church were

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 130.

⁶⁸Martin Luther, "Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows," *Luther's Works*, volume 44, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 245-400.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 262.

all sorts of errors, as alluded to above: the sacrifice of the Mass, transubstantiation, the indelible character, the abuse of the Keys. In God's perfect economy of events, it was time for fresh air.

The Road to Recovering the Treasure and Beyond

There's no doubt about it. I need to confess that I've read more Luther in the last four months than I did in the last four years. A danger of such a "quick immersion" approach versus a prolonged and patient soaking is the temptation to find and paste an appropriate quote so that Luther says what you want him to say. Penning an essay about Luther's ministry during this anniversary year exposes any writer to the reader's careful evaluation about what kind of bath the author actually enjoyed. But here goes. I will attempt a very brief background to provide a glimpse of Luther's thought as it led up to the treasure of the priesthood of all believers being so compellingly enunciated in several writings produced in the early 1520s. Luther provides not only doctrinal insight, but also concrete applications for how this treasure impacts the life and behavior of God's saints.

By the Spirit's gracious omnipotence, Luther's scriptural study continued to bear fruit and to gradually help him understand the doctrine of grace even while he lived in a spiritual environment that trumpeted works everywhere: in false theology, in confusing worship, in relics and saints and indulgences, et al. About six weeks prior to the posting of the 95 Theses, a student by the name of Franz Gunther defended a set of theses at the University of Wittenberg. The theses had been written for Franz by Luther so that Franz could defend them as partial fulfillment toward the degree of bachelor of Holy Scripture.⁷⁰ The title of the theses was "Disputation Against Scholastic Theology." Luther was making clear to everyone that he had become convinced that evangelical theology and scholasticism were incompatible. Permit three theses that demonstrate Luther's growing understanding of law and gospel. Specifically, notice the emphasis that the human will by nature is incapable either of doing good or of loving others, let alone God. Righteousness, therefore, is not a result of works. After receiving righteousness a believer does righteous deeds.

⁷⁰ Introductory comments to Martin Luther, "Disputation Against Scholastic Theology," *Luther's Works*, volume 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 9-18. The information referenced is found on page 6.

“Thesis 10. One must concede that the will is not free to strive toward whatever is declared good. This in opposition to Scotus and Gabriel.”

“Thesis 13. It is absurd to conclude that erring man can love the creature above all things, therefore also God. This in opposition to Scotus and Gabriel.”

“Thesis 40. We do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds but, having been made righteous, we do righteous deeds. This in opposition to the philosophers.”⁷¹

In but a few days, the more famous theses would find a place on a door.⁷² Earlier in that same year, Luther had accepted an invitation from Elector Frederick to preach at the Castle Church for the evening service prior to the anniversary of the church’s dedication. In that sermon and in front of the Elector, he was bold to question indulgences as a threat to grace.

You see, therefore, how dangerous a thing the preaching of indulgences is, which teaches a mutilated grace, namely, to flee satisfaction and punishment, so that an “operation of error” must be feared, as the Apostle predicted [2 Thessalonians 2:11]. For how easily can true contrition and so lax and bountiful an indulgence be preached at one and the same time, when true contrition desires a rigid extraction [of punishment] and such an indulgence relaxes it too much?⁷³

As Korthals puts it, “At the heart of Luther’s uncertainty and questions was a pastoral concern for the people he served. Luther worried that ‘frequently indulgences work against grace.’ People were being led down the wrong path by ‘seducers and confabulators and preachers of indulgences and are driven toward security, laziness, and listlessness and to forgetfulness of God and his cross, although our life is still a perpetual battle in which there must never be snoring.’”⁷⁴ The Spirit is blowing the smog away for a clearer view of salvation *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. What will take more time for Luther is fully understanding *sola Scriptura*.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10,12

⁷² A very helpful resource to study the context and content of the 95 Theses is “The Ninety-Five Theses: The Little Spark That Grew Into a Reforming Fire.” It was a conference paper by Professor James Korthals in September of 2016. It was presented to the Southeastern Conference of the Michigan District of the WELS, assembled at Faith Lutheran Church, Dexter, MI.

⁷³ Timothy Wengert, “Martin Luther Preaching on Indulgence in January 1517,” *Lutheran Quarterly*, volume XXIX (2015), 62-75, as quoted by J. Korthals, *op. cit.*, 11.

⁷⁴ Korthals, *op. cit.*, 11. Quotations within are from Wengert, *op. cit.*, 65.

Fast forward through 1518, a year which saw polemical broadsides exchanged between Eck and Luther.⁷⁵ Call this and the subsequent dialogue the skirmish before the battle, a battle engaged in the Leipzig Debate of July 1519. It became a battle that precluded any reconciliation with Rome in the future. Luther, in a letter to Spalatin, thought the debate went badly.⁷⁶ Yet from it rang forth clarity that Scripture is primary authority, as echoed in Luther's memorable statement: "A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it."⁷⁷ And so the chasm between Rome and one of her monks was ruptured in full view.

Up until now Luther had relative leeway among his peers to debate and challenge theological issues—naturally also then the role of indulgences and how they detracted from grace and faith. But to challenge authority in the church and the role of the Roman priesthood as the only means to dispense the means of grace, could not be allowed. After all, in rejecting the treasure of the priesthood of all Christians, the Roman church underscored the heresy that the Roman priesthood existed by Christ's decree as the only vehicle through which forgiveness could be funneled. This authority in the hands of the clergy could not be questioned. Consequently, one might say that the message of the pure gospel is the efficient cause of the Reformation, whereas this question of authority in the church is the formal cause.

Pope Leo X reacted strongly. On June 15 of 1520 the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* was published, threatening Luther with excommunication unless he recanted. Persecution clarifies confession, and so also with Luther. Several key writings flowed forth rather quickly in the remainder of 1520⁷⁸ and in the next couple of years. Each is a vault safeguarding the treasure of the priesthood

⁷⁵Please see the introductory comments on Martin Luther, "The Leipzig Debate," *Luther's Works*, volume 31, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 309. In his writing, the *Obelisks*, Eck declared Luther to be a follower of Hus. Luther defended himself with his publication entitled *Asterisks*. The stage was set for the pivotal debate at Leipzig.

⁷⁶ Luther wrote, "Since Eck and the people of Leipzig sought their own glory and not the truth at the debate, it is no wonder that it began badly and ended worse." The letter to Spalatin is dated July 20, 1519, and is an addendum to Martin Luther, "The Leipzig Debate," *ibid.*, 325.

⁷⁷ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Penguin Publishing Group, 1955), 90.

⁷⁸ The June 2017 issue of *Forward in Christ* (page 13) provided a helpful sidebar listing four key works of Luther, all published in 1520: "Treatise on Good Works," "To the Christian Nobility," "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," and "The Freedom of a Christian." In preparation for this assignment, I had already read the last three prior to receiving the issue. I thought about adding "Treatise on Good Works" to my study. I did not read it completely for two reasons. One, lack of time. Two, the "Treatise" came out early in June of 1520 before the papal bull was published later in June, and certainly before Luther ever received and read the bull. The latter three works came out later in the year—August, October, November. I cannot make a definitive connection with the timing of

of all believers. We are to open each with joy and see the glory of grace that the Lord bestows upon us in Christ. Pieper, in contrasting Scripture with Roman teaching, summed up the treasure we have in the priesthood of all believers this way:

“Here is the great difference between Roman and Lutheran teaching. Luther placed the believer in direct contact with God—exactly where Christ, through his work, his spirit, and his word have placed him. Heaven is open for the Christian! Already on earth the Christian lives in heaven. . . . The Lord says, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’ Between Christ and the Christian, the papacy has inserted its priest who must first mediate between the two, in essence setting up an additional savior. By so doing it has made the way to Christ so narrow that a poor sinner can never in his whole life be sure that he is saved.”⁷⁹

Possessing and proclaiming the priesthood of all Christians is a treasure that indeed helps the Christian to “already on earth live in heaven.”

Throughout these writings and others, Luther maintained the emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and expressed clearly that with this God-given status also comes responsibilities. In his later writing to the Bohemians in 1523, he included almost a checklist on the rights and responsibilities for the Christian. There definitely is no “second class” level of priesthood. As we peruse a rather lengthy section from “Concerning the Ministry,” ask: Do our people understand their priesthood to be so extensive and privileged? Do we, apart from our public office and rather as an individual, fulfill these functions?

The first office, that of the ministry of the Word, therefore, is common to all Christians. I ask, who are these who are called out of darkness into marvelous light? Is it only the shorn and anointed masks? Is it not all Christians? . . . To proclaim the death of the Lord is to declare the wonderful deeds of God who called us from darkness into marvelous light.

The second function, to baptize, they themselves have by usage allowed in cases of necessity even to ordinary women, so that it is hardly regarded any more as a sacramental function. Whether they wish or not we deduce from their own logic that all Christians, and they alone, even women, are priests, without tonsure and episcopal “character.” For in baptizing we proffer the life-giving Word of God, which renews souls and redeems from death and sins.

the works and the timing of Luther’s receiving the papal bull. However, all three now emphasize and expand on the topic of the priesthood of all believers as an outgrowth of deeper understanding of the three “classic solas.” So much so that Caemmerer writes, “The Lutheran Church likes to emphasize three principles as basic in the Christian religion: *Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scripture*. All three of these principles, however, practically express themselves in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.” Richard Caemmerer, “The Universal Priesthood and the Pastor,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* XIX (August, 1948): 568.

⁷⁹Pieper, “Luther’s Teaching of the Christian Priesthood,” 3.

The third function is to consecrate or to administer the sacred bread and wine. Here those in the order of the shorn vaunt themselves and set themselves up as rulers of a power given neither to angels nor the virgin mother. Unmoved by their senselessness we hold that this function, too, like the priesthood, belongs to all, and this we assert, not on our own authority, but that of Christ who at the Last Supper said, “Do this in remembrance of me” [Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24].

The fourth function consists in binding and loosing from sin. . . . But this office of the keys belongs to all of us who are Christians, as I have so often proved and shown in my books against the pope. For the word of Christ in Matt. 18 [:15] is addressed not only to the Apostles, but, certainly, to all the brethren: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault . . . if he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” . . . As we have declared already, the ministry of the Word belongs to all. To bind and to loose clearly is nothing else than to proclaim and to apply the gospel. For what is it to loose, if not to announce the forgiveness of sins before God? What is it to bind, except to withdraw the gospel and to declare the retention of sins? Whether they want to or not [they must concede] that the keys are an exercise of the ministry of the Word and belong to all Christians.

The fifth function is to sacrifice. . . . We call as witness the writings of the New Testament, to which we appeal in opposing Satan, and assert that in the New Testament there is no sacrifice except the one which is common to all, namely the one described in Rom. 12 [:1], where Paul teaches us to present our bodies as a sacrifice, just as Christ sacrificed his body for us on the cross. In this sacrifice he includes the offering of praise and thanksgiving. Peter likewise commands in 1 Pet. 2 [:5] that we offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, that is, ourselves, not gold or animals.

The sixth function is to pray for others. . . . For Christ gave the Lord’s Prayer to all his Christians. By this alone we are sufficiently able to prove and confirm that the priesthood is one and the same to all, whereas the papal priesthood is a falsehood devised outside the church of God and through mere effrontery brought into the church. To pray for others is to go between and make intercession of God, which is befitting Christ only and all his brethren.

The seventh and last function is to judge and pass on doctrines. . . . Indeed, there never would have been a universal papacy if this right of judgment had prevailed. . . . we are admonished not to believe false teachers. What else does this mean than that each of us shall have regard for his own salvation and be sure of Him in whom he believes and whom he follows? Each is a most free judge of all who teach him, if he himself is inwardly taught of God, as John 6 [:45] says.⁸⁰

Related to the seventh function, Spitz reminds us of the Bereans in Acts 17: “here believers exercise their prerogative as priests to judge the doctrines of the great Apostle. All did this—men and women, Jew and Greek—all priests!”⁸¹ Does the priesthood of all believers somehow then

⁸⁰ Luther, “Concerning the Ministry,” 21-32, *passim*.

⁸¹ L.W. Spitz, “The Universal Priesthood of Believers,” 335.

come into conflict with the roles of men and women as inspired by the Spirit and recorded by the apostle? Luther says no, especially in light of the distinction between the public ministry and the priesthood of all believers.

Therefore, nobody should come forward of his own accord and preach in the congregation. No, one person must be chosen from the whole group and appointed. If desired, he may be deposed. . . .

As St. Paul says in Gal. 3:28, you must pay no attention to distinctions when you want to look at Christians. You must not say: “This is a man or a woman; this is a servant or a master; this person is old or young.” They are all alike and only a spiritual people. Therefore, they are all priests. All may proclaim God’s Word, except that, as St. Paul teaches in 1 Cor. 14:34, women should not speak in the congregation. They should let the men preach, because God commands them to be obedient to their husbands. God does not interfere with the arrangement. But He makes no distinction in the matter of authority. If, however, only women were present and no men, as in nunneries, then one of the women might be authorized to preach. This is the true priesthood. As we have heard, it embraces these three things: to offer spiritual sacrifices, to pray for the congregation, and to preach. He who can do this is a priest.⁸²

Note also Luther’s comments related to women. Certainly, we lovingly seek to uphold God’s good and perfect will in regard to roles of men and women within the church. The psalmist writes, *You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees.*⁸³ That means God’s plan as revealed in Scripture for men and women is a blessed goodness—for the church, for the individuals. Yet I pondered whether at times our teaching of these roles leaves a woman more focused on her identity based on gender than on her identity based upon her priesthood. If that is the case, then we have erred against our sister in Christ and a fellow priest. How prayerfully we need to study and lovingly teach this Word.

Perhaps you have noticed a theme in Luther’s thinking about the interplay between the priesthood of all believers and the office of the public ministry. All are priests, but for good order not all serve publicly. In regard to the public ministry, a Christian dare never push self forward.

Luther explains:

It is of the common rights of Christians that we have been speaking. For since we have proved all of these things to be the common property of all Christians, no one individual can arise by his own authority and arrogate to himself alone what belongs to all. Lay hold then of

⁸² Luther, “Sermons on the First Epistle of Peter,” 55.

⁸³ Psalm 119:68.

this right and exercise it, where there is no one else who has the same rights. But the community rights demand that one, or as many as the community chooses, shall be chosen or approved who, in the name of all with these rights, shall perform these functions publicly. Otherwise, there might be shameful confusion among the people of God, and a kind of Babylon in the church, where everything should be done in order, as the Apostle teaches [1 Cor. 14:40]. For it is one thing to exercise a right publicly; another to use it in time of emergency. Publicly one may not exercise a right without consent of the whole body or of the church. In time of emergency each may use it as he deems best.⁸⁴

In his treatise to the Christian Nobility of Germany, Luther also notes this distinction between the priesthood of all Christians and the public ministry. “So then, we clearly learn from the Apostle that it should be the custom for every town to choose from among the congregation a learned and pious citizen, entrust to him the office of the ministry, and support him at the expense of the congregation.”⁸⁵ About a decade later he more forcefully reiterated the need for good order in the church. As a priest before God, a believer has the duty to preach and proclaim the good news, but that does not mean that anyone at any time can publicly claim that right on behalf of all. The occasion was the spread of Anabaptist teaching in the area through itinerant preachers. “One cannot hold an office without a commission or a call,” Luther exclaims. “If we did not hold fast to and emphasize the call and commission, there would finally be no church.”⁸⁶

But the public ministry dare never overshadow the glory and far-reaching impact of the ministry of the priesthood of all believers. Christ has graciously given to his believers, all his believers, the ministry of the Word of God. We are to live and serve our neighbors as priests before God, having been washed in the blood of the Lamb and dressed in his righteousness. Luther says, “I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ.”⁸⁷ Jesus brings us manifold opportunities for our priesthood to our neighbor. Jesus puts himself “where he would receive the living sacrifice of our lives, our neighbor in his need. What is done here is done toward the Lord,

⁸⁴ Luther, “Concerning the Ministry,” 34.

⁸⁵ Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” 175.

⁸⁶ Martin Luther, “Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers,” *Luther’s Works*, volume 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 386 passim.

⁸⁷ Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” 367.

a sacrifice offered to him by every one whom he has baptized and so made one of his priests.”⁸⁸
How can we not but think of our Savior’s words in Matthew 25?⁸⁹

Luther continues this thought in *The Freedom of the Christian* when he says, “Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians. Who then can comprehend the riches and the glory of the Christian life?”⁹⁰

And that glory shines through in whatever a Christian is doing. Luther wanted Christians to rejoice in their priesthood and encouraged them, as priests of God, to continually live as the apostle urges and *offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship.*⁹¹ Such offerings are reflected in peace-filled relationships and in an attitude of gratitude. Homes are filled with Scriptural conversations and Spirit-filled singing. Christians are content in our vocations knowing that everything we do as a priest of God, dressed in Christ, is a labor in which our thank-offering brings joy to Jesus.⁹² That means that no labor is unimportant. How this treasure can demolish the false levels of prestige sinners often ascribe to various careers! Luther writes, “A cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priest and bishops.”⁹³ Even labor within a home by a hired hand is labor seen by the Lord God above, who takes pleasure in a believer’s faith-filled offerings. “Indeed, the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings and other works of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith.”⁹⁴ A Christian’s prestige is in our holy calling before God—thanks be to Christ, each believer a prophet and priest and king.

⁸⁸ Nagel, “Luther and the Priesthood of All Believers,” 290.

⁸⁹ *The King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”* (verse 40)

⁹⁰ Luther, “The Freedom of the Christian,” 367-368.

⁹¹ Romans 12:1.

⁹² *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.* Col. 3:15-17.

⁹³ Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” *op. cit.*, 130.

⁹⁴ Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,

Therefore, the teaching of the priesthood of all believers and the teaching of a Christian's vocation, though distinct, go hand in glove. The Spirit calls us to faith and nurtures that faith through the means of grace. That call places the prophet's garment of hair, the priest's linen ephod, and the king's crown upon every believer. Now in their home, to their friends and colleagues, even to total strangers, a "little Christ" serves. And in whatever vocation an individual might choose (unless it be a vocation that goes against the word and will of the Lord God), God will provide opportunities for the priest to function. How especially true in a Christian home. "Every father of a family is a bishop in his house and the wife a bishopess. Therefore, remember that you in your homes are to help us carry on the ministry as we do in the church. If we do this we shall have a gracious God, who will defend us from all evil and in all evil."⁹⁵

Luther refocused on the ministry of the home in connection with the publications of his catechisms. Common knowledge among us is the fact that at the beginning of each of the six chief parts, Luther encouraged the functioning of the priesthood of all believers when he wrote: "As the head of the family should teach them in the simplest way to those in his household."⁹⁶ Bente summarized Luther's intent by echoing Luther's words when he wrote: "The Christian homes should again become home-churches, home-schools, where the housefathers were both house-priests and house-teachers, performing the office of the ministry there just as the pastors did in the churches."⁹⁷ To enable such exercise of the priesthood of all believers in the home, Luther simplified the catechism as compared to other contemporary catechisms. He rearranged his effort to reflect the ancient Church's effort in three main areas: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. Then, rather quickly, he added sections on Baptism and the Lord's Supper to explain and emphasize the sacraments. Luther also published posters or charts/tables

⁹⁵ Martin Luther, "Ten Sermons on the Catechism, 1528," *Luther's Works*, volume 51, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 137. Bente's translation of this phrase captures even more clearly the connection to the topic assigned. "Every housefather is a priest in his own house, every housemother is a priestess; ..." Bente, F. "Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church," printed in *Concordia Triglotta*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House,) 1921.

⁹⁶ *Luther's Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017) 1,4,6,9,11,13.

⁹⁷ F. Bente, *op. cit.*, 70.

for people to post on the walls of their homes. There were five charts/tables for fathers to use in the instruction of their families.⁹⁸ Luther not only advocated for the exercise of the priesthood of every Christian in the home, he worked hard to provide the resources for such activity to be blessed!

And then there is Luther's work on encouraging the priesthood of all believers to function in worship. That subject alone could well be a paper. An entire volume of *Luther's Works*, volume 53, would bring much to consider.⁹⁹ Naturally, such a volume would also speak to the public ministry of the Word. But consider Luther's strenuous efforts to engage the priesthood of the body of Christ in meaningful participation in worship, bringing offerings of praise, prayers, and intercession. The Reformer's efforts to bring the inspired Scriptures into the German vernacular, and his prodigious efforts at hymn-writing¹⁰⁰ demonstrate that he not only taught the priesthood of all believers, but labored strenuously to help his people live the teaching. And his efforts bear fruit still today, encouraging the Church to believe and live the treasure of the priesthood of all believers.

The Treasure – Ours to Daily Reclaim

Twenty-five years ago church and ministry issues were on the minds of many in the WELS. In fact, a study compendium was prepared by the Board for Parish Services, containing about 50 essays dealing with church and ministry.¹⁰¹ The relationship between the public minister of the gospel and the priesthood of every Christian was an issue that naturally was part of the conversation. A quick glance at the WLS essay file on the topic would garner a couple dozen more papers. What a blessing that in the last two decades this treasure has been reviewed in various venues as an effort to daily reclaim the comfort and confidence and cheer this treasure provides the soul. May it ever be so, because the treasure is always in danger. Where the gospel is proclaimed, Satan will attack. As the father of lies, he seeks to distort this truth. As the ancient

⁹⁸ F. Bente, *op. cit.*, 62-77, *passim*.

⁹⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, volume 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965).

¹⁰⁰ A quick search of the (in)famous Wikipedia came up with a list of over 40 hymns.

¹⁰¹ *WELS Ministry Compendium: Study Papers on the Doctrine of Church and Ministry*, two volumes (Milwaukee: WELS Board for Parish Services, 1992).

serpent, he seeks to poison us with the venom of divisiveness he had injected at the tree; he sought to forever rupture the relationship of creature with the loving Creator. As the lion out to devour, he seeks ever and always the eternal destruction of my soul. No wonder Luther reminds us that Satan “is ever around us and lies in wait to bring us into sin and shame, disaster and trouble (2 Timothy 2:26).”¹⁰²

What a scandalous shame when the priesthood of all Christians is torn apart by division and anger! We are one in Christ, Christians! But if Satan succeeds in sowing discord, the results ravage the flock. Quickly our love for Christ can atrophy and even die if our hearts harbor hatred or anger or insult or jealousy toward a Christian neighbor due to some sin. Yet this side of heaven, I’m a sinner, he’s a sinner, we live in a sinful world. Get used to it. Confess, absolve, and let the Spirit maintain the unity in the body of Christ.

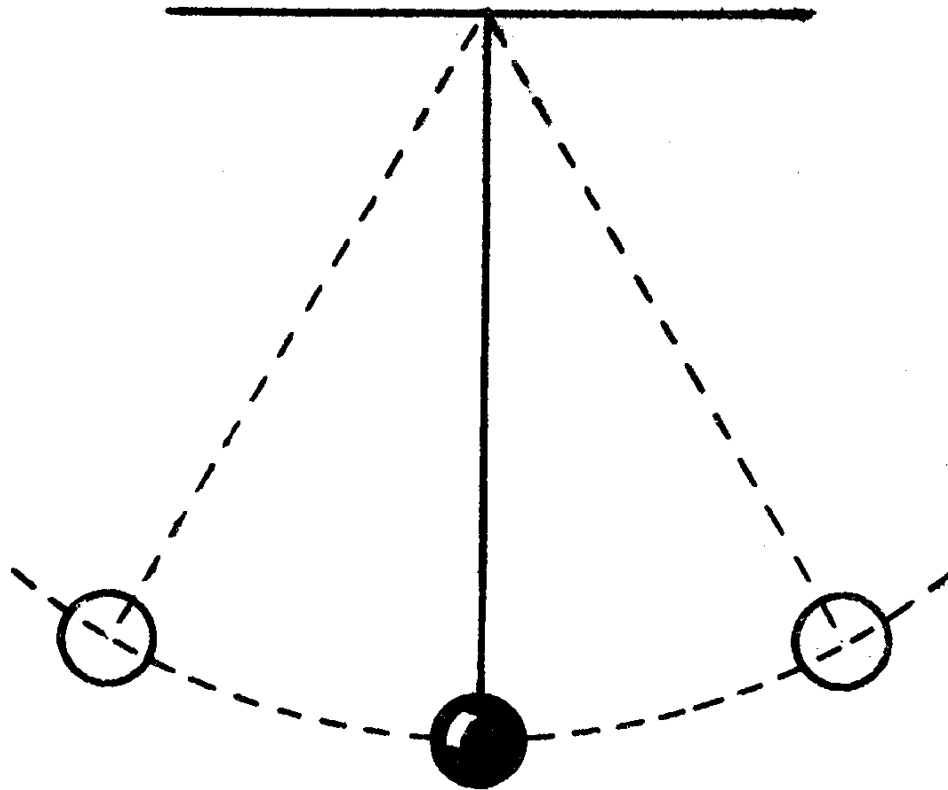
The diagram below is an attempt to visualize how the old nature at Satan’s urging can threaten the bonds of peace also in regard to the relationship between the priesthood of all believers and the public ministry. Whether an individual priest or a public minister of the gospel, two extremes are often reflected in the flock. How difficult to maintain “the Lutheran middle!”¹⁰³

¹⁰²Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” as translated by Bente, G.F. and Dau, W.H.T. in *Concordia -The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord*, (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 392

¹⁰³ The center box is based on the WLS Dogmatics notes under the Ministerial Office, page 572.

Words in italics reflect the individual priest

Words without italics reflect the public minister of the gospel

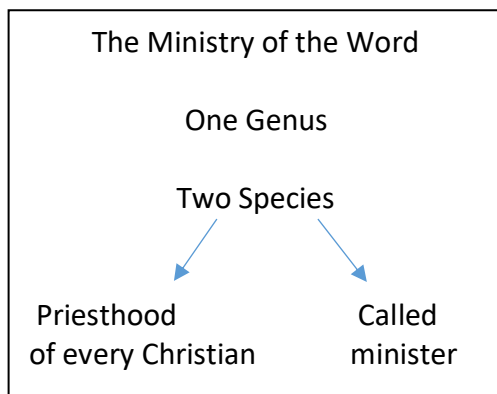


"Let the professional do it."
"Why should I work so hard?"

Schwaermer

"Why should I listen to him?"
Become a "little pope."

"two classes"



Augsburg Confession

Article XIV: Of Ecclesiastical Order

Of Ecclesiastical Order they teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called.

One hundred years ago Professor Pieper could not point to a compendium or a stocked essay file readily available to study this treasure of the Reformation. In fact, he claimed that it suffered from neglect. “It is remarkable that this teaching has never really been popular among us, that it has never really been put into practice, but has, for the most part, remained merely a matter of theory. The priesthood of every believer has once again been largely forgotten. In our congregational life—except for the voting assembly—there is hardly a trace of its being put into practice.”¹⁰⁴ A bit later in his spoken essay, he was even more direct about the absence of this teaching in the lives of our people.

But the real priestly activity to which Luther referred is usually left up to the called workers. Most often individual Christians as such do not share in preaching and teaching God’s word, in baptizing and using the Keys, in the priestly work of praying and offering sacrifice, in striving to preserve sound doctrine, and in showing concern for the lives their fellow Christians are leading. It’s almost as though the congregation has hitched its pastor to the congregational wagon, after which the members climb aboard and allow themselves to be pulled along by the pastor.

That surely was not Christ’s plan for his church. According to God’s order, the pastor exercises those functions of the priesthood publicly which could not be performed by larger numbers of people without causing disorder and confusion. To the extent that good order allows, however, every Christian—by virtue of the fact that he is a priest—is through his faith entrusted with the sacred obligation to invest the particular gifts God has given him in the welfare of the congregation and of the entire Christian church.¹⁰⁵

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, there has been quite an amount of attention to this teaching in our circles in the last years, far different from Pieper’s lament for his day. But how about his “hitch the pastor to the wagon” comment from 1917? Does that ring true today? I suppose until the trumpet sounds, there will always be the laziness of the old nature. In fact, Luther describes part of the priestly office this way: “The true priestly office is practiced when we sacrifice that villainous rogue, the lazy old ass, to God. If the world does not do this, we must do it ourselves; for in the end we must put aside every vestige of the old Adam, as we heard above in the first chapter. This is the only sacrifice that is acceptable and pleasing to God.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Pieper, “Luther’s Teaching of the Christian Priesthood,” 2.

¹⁰⁵ Pieper, *ibid*, 9.

¹⁰⁶ Luther, “Sermons on the First Epistle of Peter,” 54.

You notice that the “villainous rogue, the lazy old ass” was part of the pendulum’s extreme. It is a sin common to the flesh and needs Luther’s daily “*tut Busse*.”¹⁰⁷

Yet look for the trophies of grace among our people, evidence of the Spirit’s work through the Word on the hearts and lives of Christians. Just as we can say that more study has occurred in our midst rather recently than it did in Pieper’s day, I believe we can also say that God’s people do indeed live their priesthood perhaps more than was observed a century ago. Early in the summer I sent out a digital survey to 1042 pastors serving in a parish setting; 327 responses were received.¹⁰⁸ It was heartening to see the involvement of God’s people in various aspects of congregational life. Christ’s words are true in our lives and in our congregations: *You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.*¹⁰⁹

In my current ministry I think of two practical examples where I and others could do a better job of teaching the priesthood of all Christians to students and constituency. One example involves the student teaching requirement (and likewise the vicar year and the various early field experiences at both terminal campuses.) If, as was demonstrated above,¹¹⁰ the priesthood of all believers has the authority to call and even to depose a public minister, it goes without saying that the Christians in congregations are invaluable partners in the vetting of future candidates eager to serve in gospel ministry. Most, if not all of you, have met an eager young adult in whom the Spirit has placed a strong desire to serve as a pastor or teacher or staff minister. Evident to you is the Spirit-worked love for the Savior, a genuine love for souls, and a sincere passion to serve. Yet the desire to serve, which is given by the Spirit, does not necessarily mean the Spirit has also then bestowed the concomitant gifts necessary. Scripture makes clear not only the qualifications for ministry but also the reality that the Spirit distributes a variety of gifts to a

¹⁰⁷ The first of the 95 Theses says, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Quoted in Korthals, *op. cit.*, 23. *Tut Busse* is the German phrase for “do penance, or repent.” Korthals explains that *Busse* may be translated as penance, penitence, or repentance, depending on context.

¹⁰⁸ I stress that this was an informal survey. Some of the activities would not necessarily fall under a narrow view of the priesthood of all believers, since the congregation had installed people and set them apart for various functions of ministry in the midst of the flock—in essence a public ministry. I intended the survey also as a gauge of engagement. The survey is added as an addendum.

¹⁰⁹ John 15:16.

¹¹⁰ See footnote 81.

variety of people, according to divine stewardship.¹¹¹ What a blessing for the potential candidate when God's people, in the vicar year or student teaching semester or in the various field clinical experiences, love the student and the ministry and Jesus so much that they are willing to be honest in assessing gifts or lack thereof. The members then are serving in a most valuable way, praying for that candidate, but also honestly loving that candidate enough to say whether or not the gifts of ministry are evident. If such gifts are not evident, the discussion dare not stop. How precious it is when the saints of God would remind the disappointed candidate of his or her lasting identity that we all share as a priest of God. How wonderful to be able to encourage that candidate that another vocation is just as much an offering of service to the Lord as serving as a public minister of the gospel. To paraphrase Luther, there is glory in being a cobbler or a peasant, because God has given us glory and declared us his priests, his prophets, his kings.

Another example that came to mind in preparation for this paper is usually a yearly occurrence. It is not uncommon that students find a spouse while at MLC. Though we thankfully rejoice to call your college a dedicated college of ministry, others have noticed that it is a college where marriages often take place.¹¹² What a joy to step back and see the heavenly Father bless one of his baptized sons with the gift of one of his baptized daughters, and a priest marries a priestess. The Savior begins a marriage and a home that is the dwelling of the Great High Priest. In such a situation, I have answered e-mails from young ladies who announce their intention to decline assignment because they are going to be a Christian wife. Or in some cases, they are already married and awaiting the birth of a child. They seek to be a stay-at-home mom. How wonderful a decision! Yet, due to society's unrelenting pressure, some young ladies feel like a career is also a requirement for a fulfilled life. And the next step often follows—the conclusion that being a called worker is somehow a level above a Christian wife or mother. More than once, when a young lady e-mails a decision to decline assignment for the reasons just stated, I've e-mailed congrats and complete support. Some are surprised by my words. It makes me wonder. Is there a mindset that is sometimes inferred on campus and in synod that fosters the “two classes of Christians” falsehood? The idea that public ministry is better than other vocations, or even more

¹¹¹ See Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; Ephesians 4:7; 1 Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:5-9.

¹¹² Katherine Burgess of the Religious News Service, Oct. 11, 2013, noted that MLC was number three on a list of colleges where students met a spouse from the student body.

noble than being a Christian spouse and parent, might sneak around the hallways of our churches and schools and even in the living rooms of our members.

How about daily life in our congregations? Seventy years ago Caemmerer¹¹³ made an observation that I think is spot-on and still relevant today. In essence he talked about the administrative growth of a church or synod, and how it unintentionally impacts the perspective of God's people, especially in hindering a full comprehension of the treasure of the priesthood of all Christians. As a church grows, more time is needed to answer the "infrastructure needs" of the growing church. This visible activity means Christians are involved in maintaining church property, managing the financial accounts, keeping abreast of legal requirements, bringing offerings to support gospel ministry—and thus also compensating called workers and hired staff, organizing volunteers and then training them for various outreach efforts or teaching efforts or service efforts or worship efforts. Soon, many are involved with serving the Savior in visible ways at a visible place. Someone has to coordinate and administrate, and usually it falls upon the pastor. The unintended consequence might be a gradual move to centralization that beclouds the authority of the priesthood of all believers. "The primitive Gospel works like a leaven; each man hands it on to the next. The parallel tasks of administration, however, involve one person, or few persons, guiding many, counseling many, directing many."¹¹⁴ And sadly, perceptions could creep in that warp our thinking. Yet my activity at my local church is not an offering more precious to Jesus than offerings made at my home or in my vocation. Our financial gifts offered to support an elderly relative or to help a local food bank, or to raise our children, or to pay our taxes are all gifts given to Jesus first and foremost, as much as the envelope in the plate is. Our time invested in our vocations, where our "salt" and "light" are impacting the broader society, is also time in which Christian priests are active in all they do. The priesthood of all Christians is not limited by location to the local parish, nor limited in time to a scheduled service, meeting, or workday. The priesthood of all believers is our joyous life. (As an aside, I think this is an invaluable help for called workers trying to work through the "balance of time" issue.)

¹¹³ Richard Caemmerer, *op. cit.*, 572-575.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 573.

Other ideas to help God’s saints daily remember and reclaim the priesthood of all Christians no doubt are as varied as the individual contexts of ministry. Nevertheless, please permit me to offer a few suggestions that I think are general in nature and would apply in most situations.

- As you prepare your yearly schedule for adult and teen Bible instruction, look to see how often the doctrine comes up for review. Perhaps in a Bible study on the call, it would be only natural to include the interaction of public ministry with the priesthood of all Christians. If a unit of Bible study might include a comparative religions component or an aspect of apologetics, create learning tasks in which your people are presented case studies of varying ideas about church and ministry and the interaction between layperson and clergy.
- In your specific Bible lessons, look for ways to explain how our life of sanctification, itself a work of the omnipotent Lord¹¹⁵, reflects our lives as priests and prophets and conquering kings—all thanks to Christ. Connect the doctrine of vocation and encourage your people to see how their labors are also a way in which they *offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and please to God—which is your spiritual worship.*¹¹⁶ No doubt all of us have served souls that felt trapped in a career or job in which they imagined they made no real difference in anyone’s life. Let them marvel how God views the reality.
- Empower parents to serve as priests in their home. Perhaps open a parent/teacher meeting by modeling a simple devotion for small children. Teach parents a simple outline to help them learn how to pray *ex corde*. Help them find appropriate resources for prayers or devotions. Perhaps host a NPH book fair at church or school and thus acquaint parents with devotional and educational resources.
- Help Christians, parents and children, friends, fellow members, learn how to confess and absolve each other. Teach them the need to lovingly rebuke a loved one who is caught in a sin and to urge him or her to repent. Teach them the joy of absolving the penitent, proclaiming first the forgiveness won by Christ and then reassuring them also of your personal forgiveness. The use of the keys by the priesthood is basic law and gospel talk. Conflict management within our relationships is no longer an effort to squelch conflict and stoke the feel-good emotions. Nor is it the detective work to find out who is more

¹¹⁵ *It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.* Philippians 2:13.

¹¹⁶ Romans 12:1

wrong. It is confession and absolution. And when a child comes up and says, “I’m sorry,” what is the priest’s response? “Ok, but don’t do it again”? Or “That’s all right, everyone makes mistakes”? How dare we, priests of God, ever fail to announce the only words that will heal the relationship between a sinner and a holy God—the words that also heal the relationship between two sinners! “The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin.”¹¹⁷ This law and gospel daily conversation is how we season our conversation with salt.¹¹⁸ A sainted professor boldly emphasized this aspect of our priesthood when he said, “The administering of the Keys by the individual Christian alone justifies his length of days on earth. Is this an exaggeration? Absolutely not! His one reason for living on earth to life’s end is to exercise his authority of the Keys. Except for this his place is rightly in heaven. While he remains here, according to the word and will of His Lord, he is plainly and simply to perform the work of the Keys.”¹¹⁹

- Allow council members or other laymen on various committees to offer *ex corde* prayers prior to a meeting. Of course, first train and prepare them, if needed, much like helping parents with a simple outline. We dare never coerce them, but we can encourage them to learn to feel comfortable in praying out loud together. Otherwise, one might think that only the pastor can pray in such situations.¹²⁰ Encourage Christians who visit friends or relatives in hospitals or nursing homes to take along a devotional book, or prepare a list of passages and devotional thoughts for them to share.

Many other ideas will come to your mind. In closing I pray that all of us pause and ponder the reality of the priesthood of all Christians. That is our identity in Jesus as a baptized child of the Almighty. That identity supersedes our vocational identity as a called worker. It is the reason that the MLC mission statement included a slight addition several years ago.¹²¹ Our students are

¹¹⁷ 1 John 1:7.

¹¹⁸ *Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.* Colossians 4:6.

¹¹⁹ William Zell, “The Ministry of the Keys—Its Possessors,” a paper presented to the 38th Biennial Convention of the WELS, assembled at Northwestern College, Watertown, WI, August 1965. WLS Essay File. 6.

¹²⁰ See Michael Woldt’s article in the “Abiding Truth” series currently being published in our synod’s magazine, *Forward in Christ—A Lutheran Voice*, June 2017, 10-11.

¹²¹ “The mission of Martin Luther College is to train a corps of Christian witnesses who are qualified to meet the ministry needs of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and who are competent to proclaim the Word of God faithfully and in accord with the Lutheran Confessions in the Book of Concord.” The complete mission statement is found at <https://mlc-wels.edu/about/mission-statement/>.

training for public gospel ministry, to be sure. But regardless of whether or not they are assigned, or how long they might serve, Lord willing they are being trained in the treasure of the Lutheran Reformation. First and foremost, they are baptized children of God and therefore members of the priesthood of all Christians everywhere who cheerfully serve the Great High Priest.

*Forth in the peace of Christ we go; Christ to the world with joy we bring,
Christ in our minds, Christ on our lips, Christ in our hearts, the world's true King.*

*King of our hearts, Christ makes us kings; Kingship with him his servants gain.
With Christ the Servant-Lord of all, Christ's world we serve to share Christ's reign.*

*Priests to the world, yes, royal priests As members of Christ's family,
Cleansed by the great high-priestly death, We preach atonement full and free.*

*Christ on our lips, his Word we speak. Prophets are we whose deeds proclaim
Christ's truth in love that we may be Christ in the world, to spread Christ's name.¹²²*

M. Zarling
Reformation, 2017

¹²²James Quinn (st. 1-2,4) and Mark Jeske (st.3), *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993) hymn 518, verses 1-4.

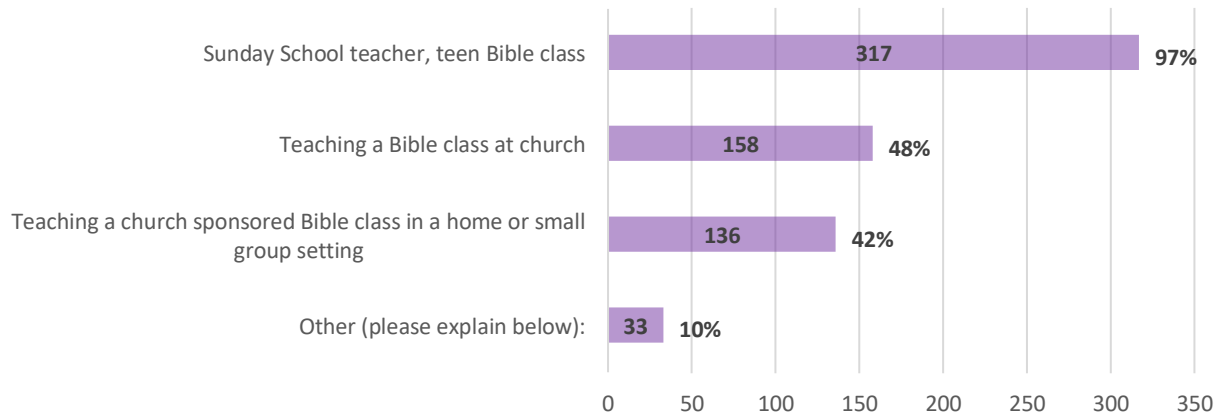
Addendum

Data presented graphically

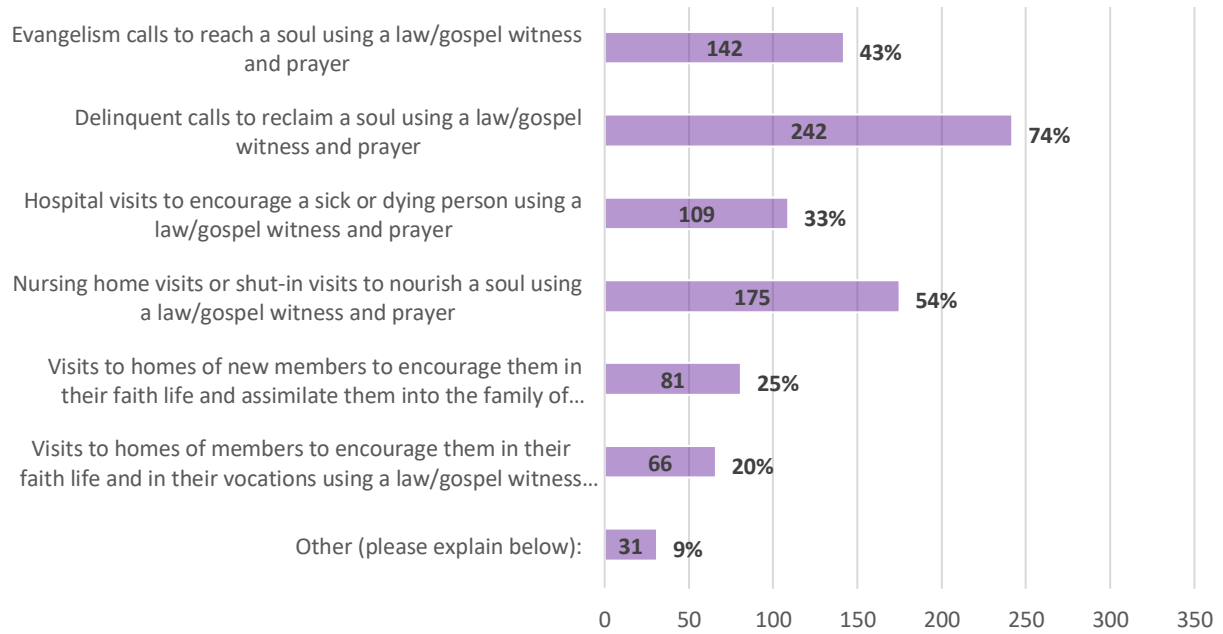
Responses are the number of congregations that have laypeople serving in these areas

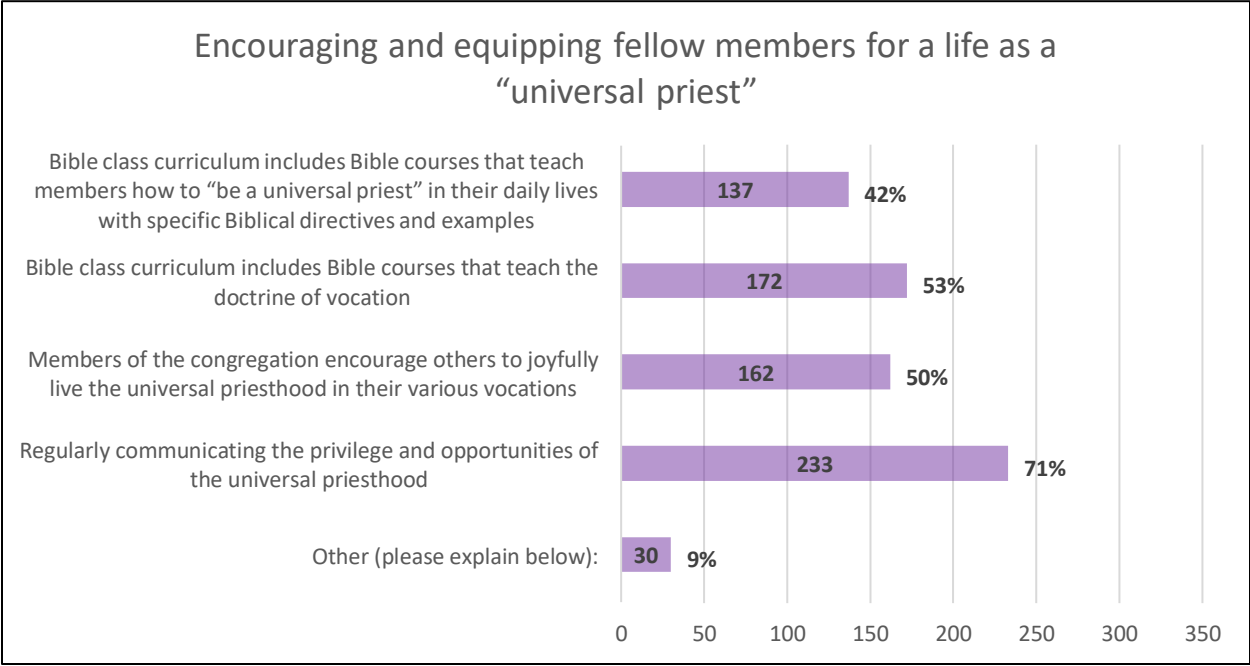
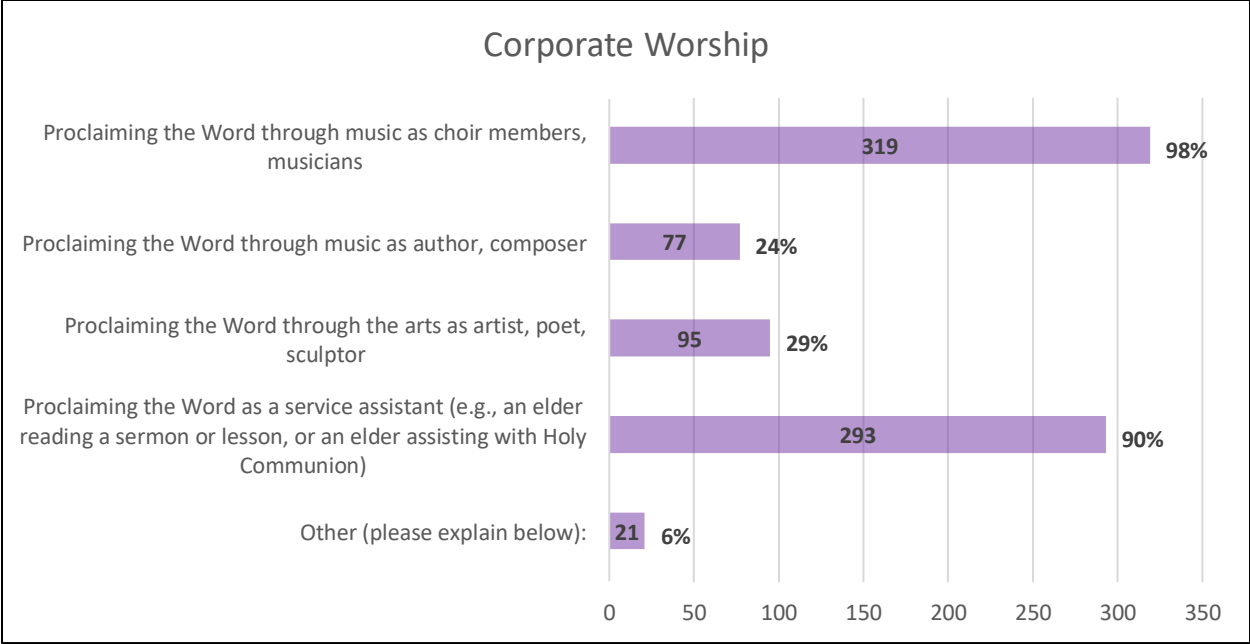
Eight pages of survey comments available from author upon request

Teaching the Word



Visitation with the Word





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Reaction to President Mark Zarling's Essay
Luther and the Saints:
The Priesthood of All Believers - A True Treasure of the Lutheran Reformation

A pastor accepts a call away from his congregation. Now there is a vacancy, and vacancies aren't easily filled these days. A year passes. Another year. Still no pastor. Will the congregation be ok? It's not a matter of how talented or beloved their former pastor was. It's not a matter of how talented or dedicated the people are, either. The crux of the matter is how well the people understand and believe in *the priesthood of all believers*. Even in congregations with a full staff, this doctrine deserves more attention than a bullet point mention in a Bible Information Class lesson on *Church*. Quoting August Pieper, Pastor Zarling calls this teaching *the treasure of the Reformation*.

After inviting his readers to let the relevant *sedes doctrinae* dwell richly in them, Pastor Zarling helps us see how this teaching played out in Luther's thinking and teaching. He points out that when speaking of Christ's office Luther used the term *priest* in a way that also included the office of prophet and king. He declares that *baptism unites us to Jesus so that he graciously declares us priests and kings and prophets* (8). Not only for Christ but also for the Christian, these three roles really comprise one office (10). This is more than a matter of semantics. Though the roles connected to the office are rich and varied, there is one office, one Christ, one source of gospel comfort for each of us.

Pastor Zarling doesn't hesitate to proclaim this comfort to his readers: *Oh, how Satan seeks to cover our eyes so we don't see the nameplates the Lord Jesus has attached to our hearts through baptism... Believe what God says you are, not what you think or feel about yourself!* (11) Then Pastor Zarling unpacks the *so what?* of this new identity with gospel encouragement and scriptural examples of what it looks like to live like prophets, priests, and kings. To demonstrate the timelessness of this teaching, he draws his examples entirely from the Old Testament, starting with one of the most ancient of believers, Abel, of whom he says: *The Spirit moved an individual to take of his vocational labors and act as a priest, coming to the Lord dressed in his promises and bringing a thank-offering to reflect the heart's gratitude. In so doing, he sent a powerful sermon to his brother, a sermon that ignited hostility, which is always the case in the heart of natural man* (13).

In the section titled *The Rejected Treasure Recovered*, Pastor Zarling helps us better appreciate the fresh air of sound teaching by holding it next to the diesel-laced smog of heresy that permeated the church of Luther's day. There was no priesthood of believers, only a priesthood of priests, and the papacy was hiding their heresy behind a seemingly impenetrable power structure. Pastor Zarling leads us to view Luther's 1520 treatise *To the Christian Nobility* from the perspective of its original readers: *Understanding the truth of justification and the power of baptism underscores the truth - radical for the time - that the Christian laity in their status before God are equal to the clergy* (18). With Scripture as his instrument, Luther tore down the wall between clergy and laity. He also recast the ecclesiastical use of the word *power* in gospel terms: *Through canon law the Romanists have almost destroyed and made unknown the wondrous grace and authority (emphasis mine) of baptism and justification* (Luther, *To the Christian Nobility*, 128, quoted by Zarling, 18). In view of this piece of history the reader can't help but ponder what seemingly insurmountable obstacles the Lord will overcome through the proclamation of the gospel in our time.

In the section titled *The Road to Recovering the Treasure and Beyond*, Pastor Zarling traces a line from *the Spirit's gracious omnipotence* in Luther's study of Scripture (20), to Luther's disenchantment with scholasticism (20,21), to the Ninety-Five theses (21), to the Leipzig Debate (22), to *Exsurge Domine* (22), to Luther's great treatises of 1520 (22), to his *Concerning the Ministry* of 1523 (23,24), and to his dealings with the Anabaptists (26). One could say that these events tell the story of how Luther uncovered and proclaimed the three *solas* of the Reformation. Pastor Zarling's unifying thread, however, is the *priesthood of believers*, and he explains how both perspectives on the Reformation fit together: *One might say that the message of the pure gospel is the efficient cause of the Reformation, whereas this question of the authority in the church is the formal cause* (22). In footnote number 78, he quotes Richard Caemmerer as saying: *The Lutheran Church likes to emphasize three principles as basic in the Christian religion: Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura. All three of these principles, however, practically express themselves in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers*" (23). There you go: a three-part outline for your upcoming Bible class on *The Priesthood of Believers*.

Helpful as both an example and encouragement, Pastor Zarling discusses the balance between the priesthood of believers and the public ministry. He points first of all to Luther's writings to emphasize that *all are priests, but for good order not all serve publicly* (25). Quoting Luther he says, *If we did not hold fast to and emphasize the call and commission, there would finally be no church* (26). The public ministry of the gospel is indeed a glorious thing, and public ministers of the gospel deserve the respect that accompanies their office. At the same time, Pastor Zarling, again drawing from Luther, points out that *the public ministry dare never overshadow the glory and far-reaching impact of the ministry of the priesthood of all believers* (26). What a joy and comfort there is in Pastor Zarling's reminder: *Christians are content in our vocations knowing that everything we do as a priest of God, dressed in Christ, is a labor in which our thank-offering brings joy to Jesus* (27)!

A person can't discuss Luther and the priesthood of believers without mentioning Luther's translation of Scripture into the German vernacular, or the way Luther encouraged fathers to teach the catechism *in the simplest way to those in his household*, or the way Luther put the words and music of liturgy and hymns into the hearts and mouths of lay people. In his essay, Pastor Zarling expresses his desire for more space to delve into these *Luther and the Saints*-flavored topics. Perhaps we can use the space that has already been established in the form of post-essay discussion to do just that.

In his concluding section, Pastor Zarling explores the ways the sinful flesh tries to rob us of this gospel treasure, this teaching on the *priesthood of believers*. What pastor can't relate to the pendulum diagram, which shows the way congregational members (including the pastor) may find themselves at one of two extremes, either apathy, or antipathy? How helpful and encouraging it is to remember just how important the doctrine of *the priesthood of believers* is in finding the Lutheran middle! Who among us can't relate to Caemmerer's observation that administrative growth can unintentionally impact the perspective of God's people so that they are hindered from seeing the treasure of the priesthood of all Christians (35)? How helpful it is to hear the encouragement to let the primitive Gospel work like leaven!

Certainly Pastor Zarling's practical suggestions for helping congregations reclaim the priesthood of all Christians will be widely appreciated. They deserve hearty discussion, perhaps more time than we can give here. I can imagine that his list of ideas would be good fodder for a circuit meeting discussion. As an example, consider again just this one statement among many in this section: *The use of the keys by the priesthood is basic law and gospel talk. Conflict management within our relationships is no longer an*

effort to squelch conflict and stoke the feel-good emotions. Nor is it the detective work to find out who is right and wrong. It is confession and absolution (37).

It is not beyond the realm of possibility even in our corner of the world, that a time may come when pastors will not be allowed to preach, and weekly church services will have to be replaced entirely by home devotions. God preserve us from such a day, but even if it comes, we have nothing to fear. Nobody will ever be able to silence God's Word from being proclaimed, and nothing will ever stop his royal priesthood from offering spiritual sacrifices to the Lord. But we don't have to wait until society crumbles to appreciate the treasures of the *priesthood*. Here and now, in our battle against the sinful flesh, it is wonderfully invigorating to breathe the gospel's fresh air. Thank you, Pastor Zarling for an essay that was both scholarly and engaging, both devotional and practical.

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