

The Priesthood of All Believers and Other Pious Myths

Timothy Wengert

“Alice laughed. ‘There's no use trying,’ she said: ‘one CAN'T believe impossible things.’ ‘I daresay you haven't had much practice,’ said the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’”

Six impossible things before breakfast! This famous Lewis Carrol quotation from *Alice in Wonderland* might well serve as the subtitle for my remarks. The request from the planning committee was simple enough: speak about Luther's understanding of the priesthood of all believers. So, armed with the latest technology (the critical, “Weimar” edition of Luther's works in digital form online), I set off to do my work. Immediately, I ran into the queen of hearts. There were no references to this phrase anywhere in Luther's own writings. “Das allgemeine Priestertum aller Gläubigen,” in all of its Latin and German permutations was nowhere to be found.¹

Now, to be sure, this was not the first time this had happened to me. I looked for the friendship between Luther and Melancthon and discovered that they were colleagues not friends. Then, I found that the four “classical” marks of the church—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—were the inventions of nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholics! I wanted to discuss Luther's comments on the “orders of creation,” only to discover they were the construct of a nineteenth-century German Lutheran ethicist. I, who find

¹ The closest is in WA 8: 254, 7, where Luther refers to “das eynige gemeyne priesterthum.”

deconstructionist historians a plague on the planet, had turned into my own worst enemy! Almost no matter what the category into which my orderly mind wanted to stick Luther—two kingdoms, orders of creation, Nicene marks of the church, friend of Melanchthon—evaporated into thin air in the face of the actual documents Luther penned.

So, now, with the priesthood of all believers! Although the editors of Luther's works discuss this category all over the Weimar edition, Luther himself never used the term. In fact, if we want to find the first serious discussion of the category though not the term itself, we have to jump forward 150 years to 1675, when Philipp Jakob Spener penned his lengthy preface to a new printing of the sermons of Johannes Arndt. In what became the manifesto of Lutheran pietism, *Pia desideria*, Spener pleaded for "the establishment and diligent practice of the Spiritual Priesthood."²

² That is, "die Aufrichtung und fleissige Übung deß Geistlichen Priesterthums." Cited in *TRE* 27: 406. Because the authors of this article (Harald Goertz and Wilfried Härle) assume that Luther invented the category, they argue that Spener's understanding and Luther's were the same. Yet their citation of Johann Hinrich Wichern's comments in the Hamburg church struggle of 1839-40 actually indicate that, for him, the concept came from Spener. He wrote of an "Erneuerung der Verkündigung des allgemeinen Priestertums aus *Speners* Herz und Mund." For a very thoughtful refutation of the connection between Luther and Spener, one that calls into question Luther's "invention" of the priesthood of all believers, see Norman Nagel, "Luther and the Priesthood of All Believers," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 61 (1997): 277-98, especially 295. He also realizes that there is little difference between the arguments of the Roman sacerdotalists and the later Pietists. (In his sermons on 1 Peter, *Commentarius super priorem D. Petri Epistolam, in quo textus declaratur, quaestiones dubiae solvuntur, observationes eruuntur & loca in*

By the waning decades of the nineteenth century, this category had become completely ensconced in Luther studies. In his influential book, *Luther und die Ordination* (2nd edition published in Wittenberg in 1889), Georg Rietschel wrote how Luther had little place for the ordained ministry and derived it exclusively from the priesthood of all believers.³ Even though at least one editor of the WA objected to

speciem pugnancia conciliantur [Jena: Lobenstein, 1641], Johann Gerhard also wrote of a spiritual priesthood, but not in the sense Spener used the term.)

³ Georg Rietschel, *Luther und die Ordination* (Wittenberg: R. Herrosé, 1883), especially 30-42, where he claims that the most important result of the doctrine of justification is the priesthood of all believers. He was writing especially against Kliefoth, *Liturgische Abhandlungen* and in favor of a congregationalist understanding of the church. See, especially, pp. 102f., “Vielmehr ist die Einzelgemeinde schon Kirche, weil in ihr alle wesentlichen Momente der Kirche, die Gemeinschaft der Gläubigen, in der Word und Sacrament verwaltet wird, zum vollgültigen Ausdruck kommt.” For him, ordination was the “Übertragung” of the authority of the entire priesthood of all believers to an individual. The last sentence of his essay (p. 112) proves its pietistic character, “Rechte Pastoren sind wir nur dann, wenn und soweit als wir lebendige Christen sind.” He is arguing against Friedrich Stahl, *Die Kirchenverfassung nach Lehre und Recht der Protestanten*, 2nd ed. (Erlangen: Bläsing, 1862 [1st ed.: 1840]), 394ff., who argued against Höfling, *Grundsätze evangelisch-lutherischer Kirchenverfassung*, 3rd ed. (Erlangen: Bläsing, 1853), and against Kliefoth, *Liturgische Abhandlungen*, I:342. Thus, p. 42, he concludes, “Nicht ist für [Luther] ein besonderes Amt der Institution seitens Christo für das Predigtamt nötig, es ist vielmehr mit dem vollbrachten heil für di geordnete Gemeinde dadurch von selbst gegeben.” For a history of the earlier debate, involving particularly Friedrich Stahl and Johann Höfling in the mid-nineteenth century, see Harald Goertz, *Allgemeines Priestertum und ordiniertes Amt bei Luther* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1997), 1-27. Remarkably, Goertz never inquires after the origin of the term “allgemeines Priestertum,” despite his own methodological interest in metaphor and hermeneutics. Because of the failure to deal with this fundamental

Rietschel's reconstruction of Luther's views on ordination—especially the myth that regular ordinations began in 1525—his theories have continued to dominate discussions of ministry among Lutherans.⁴

One of the most telling distortions of the historical record in this country came from the translator and editor of *Pia desideria*, Theodore Tappert, who (you might recall) also edited *The Book of Concord* in 1959. There, in a footnote to article five of the Augsburg Confession, Tappert insisted that this article was not to be understood clerically, implying that one should read it as a reference to the priesthood of all believers. Not only had he mistranslated a footnote to the critical edition of the Lutheran confessions—it read clericalistically not clerically—but he also reinforced the completely mistaken notion that the Augsburg Confession says little or nothing about the public office of ministry, despite the fact that article five is expressly about “Das Predigtamt,” the office of preaching. When Eric Gritsch, the translator for the new edition, and I dropped the footnote and changed the translation to reflect the actual meaning of the text, I even received a phone call from an angry pietistic preacher in Nebraska, demanding to

problem of definition and ignorance of the nineteenth-century debate, other works are less than helpful. These include Cyril Eastwood, *The Priesthood of All Believers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1962); Roy A. Harrisville, *Ministry in Crisis: Changing Perspectives on Ordination and the Priesthood of All Believers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987); Herschel H. Hobbs, *You Are Chosen: The Priesthood of All Believers* (San Francisco, et al.: Harper & Row, 1990); and Carl R. Trueman, “Reformers, Puritans and Evangelicals: The Lay Connection,” in: *The Rise of the Laity in Evangelical Protestantism*, ed. Deryck W. Lovegrove (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), 17-35.

⁴ See WA 38:401.

know how I could possibly have eliminated such a brilliant footnote. In fact, as I told him, there is no mention of the “priesthood of all believers” anywhere in *The Book of Concord*, despite what Tappert and others imagined. So much for proving the necessity of laity Sundays from the Lutheran confessions!⁵

This brings me to the point of my remarks. The category of the “common priesthood of all believers,” developed by seventeenth-century pietism and championed by some Luther scholars to this day, has nothing to do with Luther’s own thought. In fact, once we jettison this notion and approach Luther’s own statements *de novo*, we discover a far more revolutionary approach to Christian ministry—one that, to be sure, totally eliminates the distinction between the laity and clergy, while at the same time giving new authority and purpose to the public office of ministry in Christ’s church.⁶

⁵ Tappert’s position is echoed four years later in a tract by Erwin Mülhaupt, *Allgemeines Priestertum oder Klerikalismus?* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1963). In the foreword (p. 5f.), he champions the priesthood of all believers against any and all Romanizing and ecumenical tendencies! As an example of his idiosyncratic reading of Luther, see comments on *Daß eine christliche Versammlung oder Gemeinde Recht und Macht habe, alle Lehre zu urteilen und Lehrer zu berufen, ein- und abzusetzen, Grund und Ursach aus der Schrift* (1523; WA 11: 408-16). “Man könnte diese Schrift den Freiheitsbrief und die Magna Charta der christlichen Gemeinde nennen, die Freiheit, Recht und Vollmacht der christlichen Gemeinde auf das allgemeine Priestertum der Gläubigen begründet.” Not only is that *not* what this tract is about, it also completely misconstrues Luther’s theology by ignoring the historical context of the tract.

⁶ Even Mülhaupt’s tendentious tract admits that Luther did not see the concept of the priesthood of all believers as undercutting the ministerial office. Unfortunately, Mülhaupt (pp. 17-19), like many others, describes the pastoral office as deriving its authority from the priesthood of all believers.

The Scene of the Crime: An den christlichen Adel of 1520

The quickest way to unmask our mythical category is to return to the scene of the crime, Martin Luther's comments in one of his most influential treatises, usually called in English, *To the Christian Nobility*.⁷ Actually, the full title is *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation concerning the Improvement of the Christian "Stand" [Walk of Life]*. Already this final phrase in the title connotes a revolution in Christian thought, because the subtitle tells us what Luther expected to accomplish in the tract itself: "concerning the improvement of *the Christian Stand* [walk of life]." "Walk of life" is our mediocre rendering throughout the new edition of *The Book of Concord* of that slippery German word, *Stand*. It used to be translated "estate" (as in the estate of marriage or the fourth estate), but few are familiar with the term nowadays. In fact, it is related more generally to the English word "standing," a term still used to designate those are allowed to bring a case or an appeal before a court. In the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, that

⁷ This treatise was completed by 23 June 1520 (cf. WA 6: 392). At nearly the same time (July 1520), Luther produced another tract, *An Essay on the New Testament, That Is, on the Holy Mass* (WA 6: 352-78). In it, too, he spoke of something akin to the priesthood of all believers. There, however, he uses the word "Pfaffen" [cleric]. His interest in the problem dated back at least to 1519, when, in a letter to Georg Spalatin (dated 18 December 1519; WA Br 1:595, 26-42), Luther stated his uncertain about the term "sacerdotes," argued for no distinction between the laity and clergy except in service (*nisi ministerio*), and complained about the extra burdens imposed by Rome upon priests like Spalatin, whose actual office was no different than other, non-ordained courtiers. Other tracts which mention that all believers are *sacerdotes* include *Freedom of a Christian* (WA 7: 20-38), *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (WA 6: 497-573); *Grund und Ursache aller Artikel D. M. Luthers* (WA 7: 308-457); *De instituendis ministris Ecclesiae* (see below); *Von der Winckelmesse und Pffafenweihe* (WA 38: 195-256); *Der 110. Psalm* (WA 41: 79-239).

is, Luther's empire, the estates (*Stände*) were three: imperial nobility, clerical lords, and the imperial cities. That is, these three groups had standing (literally) before the emperor.

More generally, in Luther's day everyone knew that in the church itself there were two estates, two *Stände*, the worldly (or secular) and the spiritual (including priests, bishops and monastics). Yet here, in the title, Luther has done a remarkable thing, namely, spoken of a single Christian estate: "des Christlichen Standes." There is no mistaking it. In other respects Luther's open letter to the imperial princes was quite traditional, taking its place beside a host of fifteenth-century *gravamina*, as they were called.⁸ However, previous "lists of complaints" about the church took the form of grievances by the one estate (the worldly) against the other (the spiritual). Luther, already in the title, has reduced the Christian *Stand*, or walk of life, to a single one.

There is a second place that the revolutionary flavor of Luther's tract becomes clear. Most other *gravamina* simply listed the problems of the church and offered certain "legislative proposals," as we might call them, to rectify the problems. Luther, on the contrary, had other fish to fry. He put his finger on the problem: not with individual shortcomings in imperial public and ecclesial life—although he later provided a list—but with the basic distinction between the worldly and spiritual estates. The Romanists, he argued in the introduction, had surrounded themselves with three walls to prevent their being attacked. First, when threatened by civil authority, they distinguished worldly and

⁸ See Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 40-49.

spiritual estates, placing the latter over the former. Second, when threatened by Scripture, they claimed that the pope had sole authority to interpret it. Third, when threatened by a council, they claimed that only the pope could call one. In his introduction, Luther set about to destroy these “paper walls,” as he called them.

Luther’s attack on the first wall contains the primary and most important proof text for the imaginary “priesthood of all believers,” and therefore we will spend most of our time looking at it. Already the beginning of his attack makes it quite clear that Luther had something else in mind than our mythical category. “Someone invented the notion that the Pope, bishops, priests, and monastics are called the spiritual *Stand* [walk of life], while princes, lords, tradesmen and agricultural workers are the worldly *Stand* [walk of life]. This is a very fine gloss and hypocrisy.”⁹ The question, as Luther saw it, was whether or not there were two estates, walks of life, types of standing (before God), that is, *Stände*, in the Christian church and life.

Already we are put on notice that the way modern Lutherans have fought over the public office of ministry is completely wrongheaded. On the one hand, Luther was not defending ontological change here—that is not what the word *Stand* implies at all. On the other hand, as Luther’s solution to the medieval *Zwei-Stände Lehre* (doctrine of the two estates), if I may coin the term, is not simply a dive into modern American functionality and democracy. To make these two extremes the terms of the debate is to misconstrue completely Luther’s true insight.

⁹ WA 6: 407, 10-12. Here and throughout, translations are by the author.

Luther begins his argument against this “doctrine of the two estates” by completely destroying the distinction in the Christian church. Listen to what he wrote.

For all Christians are truly part of the spiritual walk of life [*Stand*], and among them there is no difference except because of the office [*Amt*] alone, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12[:12ff.], that we are all part of one body. Nevertheless each member has its own work so that it serves the others. This each person does, because we have one baptism, one Gospel, one faith and are equally Christians. For baptism, Gospel, and faith alone make a spiritual and Christian people.¹⁰

When the ontologists and functionalists do battle, it is by misconstruing the two most important words in this paragraph.¹¹ For Luther (and, for that matter, for his sixteenth-century readers) the word *Stand* here did not mean essence, and the word *Amt* did not

¹⁰ WA 6: 407, 13-19.

¹¹ For a description of the origins of this battle over *Übertragungslehre* versus *Stiftungstheorie* in the nineteenth century, see Goertz, *Allgemeines Priestertum*, 1-27 and TRE 27: 405. Unfortunately, the authors of the TRE article (Goertz and Wilfried Härle, his *Doktorvater*) finally come out in favor of a kind of functional definition of the ordained ministry, in part by completely misconstruing sixteenth-century understandings of the words *Amt* and *Stand* (e.g., “Nirgends proklamiert Luther jedoch ein besonderes göttliches Gebot für die Institution des ordinierten Amtes” and “Die zahlreiche Stiftungsaussagen bei Luther beziehen sich nicht auf das [ordinierte] Amt, sondern auf den [Pfarr-] Stand”). Thus, they still derive the authority of the pastoral office from the priesthood of all believers. Had it ever occurred to them that the priesthood of all believers itself was a later construct of pietists and not of Luther, they might have avoided this dichotomy.

merely describe a functionary. On the contrary, Luther's point becomes clear in his citation of 1 Corinthians 12 that we are all part of one body. This implied two things for him. First, our essence as Christians does not consist of more or less (Platonic) participation in God but in baptism, gospel and faith alone. These things alone, and not how enamored we are of Platonic spirituality, give us standing before God and put us in the body of Christ.

Within that one body, then, we serve. Yet, to reduce service and office to "mere" functions, the authority of which is derived from the priesthood of all believers, is to miss Luther's point entirely. The fact that he used this word, "serve," means that Luther placed at the center of his understanding of offices not "*Herrschaft*" (lordship) but "*Dienerschaft*" (servanthood).¹² That is, he interpreted everything that happens in the body of Christ under the theology of the cross. (Here a bit of explanation is in order. Luther's theology of the cross is not a theory about Christ's crucifixion—although it has implications for how we view the cross. It is instead, as he puts it, the *revelatio Dei sub contrario specie*, that is, the revelation of God under the appearance of the opposite or, as I prefer to put it, God revealed in the last place you or I would reasonably look.)¹³ Thus, holding an office within the one body of Christ can never be a claim to power but a powerful claim to weakness, to service. This is not simply a "going through the motions"

¹² For one use of this term, see Klaus Petzold, *Die Grundlagen der Erziehungslehre im Spätmittelalter und bei Luther* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1969).

¹³ Timothy J. Wengert, "'Peace, Peace ... Cross, Cross': Reflections on How Martin Luther Relates the Theology of the Cross to Suffering," *Theology Today* 59 (2002): 190-205.

or “fulfilling certain functions” or “lording it over the laity” but rather a self-emptying and a laying down of one’s life. Service, understood as dying for the other, has what one might even call an ontological edge to it, since, in Aristotelian physics at any rate, the one thing that changes the “substance” or essence of who we are is death.

Thus, this text cannot mean, “anyone can be a pastor,” but rather, “all of us are members of the one body of Christ and individually servants to each other in our respective offices.” The Protestant and pietistic misappropriation of these terms turns everything on its head and replaces service with power-grabbing and the unity of Christ’s body with the disunity of individualistic spirituality. Or, as my friend Paul Rorem puts it, the democratic, American misconstrual of the priesthood of all believers means in actuality the priesthood of no believers.

Having said that, however, it is important to realize that Luther does insist that, by virtue of our baptism, we *are* all priests, bishops and popes, that is to say, we are all Christians.¹⁴ However, this did not imply for him a democratization of the Christian church or a denigration of the pastoral office. Instead, it was an attack on the papal claim that, by virtue of the power to consecrate and ordain, the pope and his bishops could

¹⁴ Here Harald Goertz, „Allgemeines Priestertum,“ *RGG*⁴, 1:317, is correct in saying, „Da das ‚Priestersein‘ eine (bildhafte) Umschreibung für das Christsein is, kann es auch nicht anders *begründet* sein als dieses, nämlich im Rechtfertigungsgeschehen.“ *TRE* 27:404 lists other instances where Luther equated Priesthood with being Christian. See especially WA 10/3: 308ff. (a sermon delivered on the twelfth Sunday after Trinity, 1522) and 12: 318, 18-21 (a 1522 sermon on 1 Peter 2:18).

create a separate, spiritual *Stand* [walk of life]. Read in this light, Luther's comments that follow make sense

That the pope or bishop anoints, makes tonsures, ordains, consecrates, or dresses differently from the laity, may make a hypocrite or an idolatrous oil-painted icon, but it in no way makes a Christian or spiritual human being. In fact, we are all consecrated priests through Baptism, as St. Peter in 1 Peter 2[:9] says, "You are a royal priesthood and a priestly kingdom," and Revelation [5:10], "Through your blood you have made us into priests and kings."¹⁵

It is the papal claim that, by virtue of ordination, a bishop may transfer someone into the "spiritual" Christian estate that rouses Luther's ire. The claim itself simply makes hypocrites or "olgotzen," a delightful, sixteenth-century German word that means "an oil icon depicting a god." The only way any of us in this room or any Christian in Luther's day becomes Christian or spiritual is and was through baptism. With one stroke Luther has eliminated the laity as a separate category of Christian existence. In this sense, we are all priests, but only in the sense that the word "priest," is used here, namely, as "a Christian or spiritual human being."

Having robbed episcopal consecration of its previous authority and destroyed the "two-estate theory," Luther faced two problems: he had to explain what ordination was

¹⁵ WA 6: 407, 19-25.

and what set the public office of ministry apart from other Christian offices.¹⁶ However, he had to do this in such a way as to prove that he was not teaching anything new in the church—a sure sign of heresy for any sixteenth-century theologian—but was merely recalling earlier church practices. Here is how he did it. He began by redefining the purpose of ordination.

Thus, the bishop's consecration is nothing other than when he, in the place of and on behalf of the entire assembly takes someone from the general populace [*Hauffen*], who all have equal authority, and entrusts to him the exercise of this authority for the others. Just as if ten brothers, who were the children of a king and equal heirs, were to select one who would rule the inheritance for them. They are all kings and hold equal authority, but still the rule is entrusted to one. Let me say it even more clearly. If a small group of godly Christian lay persons were captured and left in the wilderness, and they did not have among them a priest consecrated by a bishop, and they were there agreed and chose one among them—whether single or not—and they entrusted to him the office of baptizing, celebrating the Mass, forgiving sin and preaching, he would be truly a priest, as if all bishops and popes [408] had consecrated him. From this

¹⁶ See the discussion by Harald Goertze and Wilfried Härle in *TRE* 27: 402-10. They stress the metaphoric use of the term by Luther (and use the more accurate “Priestersein” [priestly existence] rather than “Priestertum” [priesthood]) and point out that Luther had to redefine the ordained office at the same time.

principle we derive the notion that in an emergency any person can baptize and absolve, which would not be possible were we not all priests.¹⁷

Luther in no way denies the authority or office of the bishop to ordain. Instead, it is the one ordained, taken from the general populace possessing equal authority, who is entrusted by the bishop with the authority that belongs to all in the congregation. This, Luther claimed, was the practice of the ancient church.¹⁸ The example of the royal brothers is hardly far-fetched, since there were all kinds of secular power-sharing agreements among noble heirs. The other example is, in fact, quite traditional indeed. Canon Law recounts a story attributed to Augustine, who told of two men on a sinking ship, one a catechumen and the other a baptized Christian who had committed a grave sin. The latter baptized the former, so that the former could pronounce absolution on the latter.¹⁹ Indeed, the notion of emergency baptisms or absolutions, performed by any Christian and recognized as valid by the church, had an ancient and storied history. What *is* new is that Luther now applies the same rule to ordination—but only for Christians trapped in a desert and unable, by virtue of this emergency, to avail themselves of the normal order of the church. The underlying points dare not be forgotten: we are all priests by virtue of our baptism; the church must have public ministers.

¹⁷ WA 6: 407, 29 – 408, 2.

¹⁸ WA 6: 408, 2-7.

¹⁹ See the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, 67, translated by Jane Strohl, in: *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 341. The citation is from Gratian, *Decretum* III, dist. 4, ch. 36, citing a supposed letter from Augustine to Fortunatus.

Why did Luther argue this way and lift up the importance of baptism in making spiritual people? The answer comes in the next paragraphs: in order to assure the princes that they have the authority to intervene in ecclesiastical governance. I say ecclesiastical *governance*, because in the matter of publicly preaching the gospel or presiding at the Lord's Table, Luther drew the line. The secular authorities may, as Christians, exercise their own office to keep order, and no one may, by virtue the "doctrine of the two estates," claim exemption from such authority. To invent a Lutheresque simile: just as, in exercising their offices a Christian mother may (indeed must) suckle her newborn, baptized child and a Christian father may change its diapers, so Christian rulers may exercise their God-given office among their fellow believers.

However, having given Christian princes authority to exercise their office among all other Christians does not mean either that Luther was inviting the secular fox into the ecclesial henhouse or that there was no special office of the public ministry. In fact, immediately after introducing the role of princes, Luther shored up the authority of the pastoral office, something commentators have often overlooked.

For whatever crawls out of the baptismal font may boast about itself that it is already consecrated a priest, bishop and pope, although it is not seemly for each to exercise such an office. For, because we are all equally priests, no one dare push themselves forward and usurp [this office] without our permission and election to do this, since we all have equal authority. For what is held in common no one may take for themselves without the community's permission and entrustment. Moreover, whenever it happens that someone is elected to such an office and then is deposed because of

malfeasance, then he is just what he was before. Therefore the priesthood should be nothing other in Christianity than an officeholder: as long as he is in [such an] office, he carries out [its duties]; where he is deposed, then he is a peasant or citizen like the others.²⁰

At first blush, the text seems to strike a blow in favor of our mythical “priesthood of all believers.” “For whatever crawls out of the baptismal font ... is already consecrated a priest, bishop, and pope.” This would seem to settle it, were it not for two things. First, one can hear the metaphorical character of Luther’s comments, since no one talks about the bishopric or papacy of all believers, and yet Luther lumps the three together.²¹ Second, already in 1520, Luther realized that our baptism may consecrate us as priests but does not authorize us to exercise the pastoral office.²² This was long before Luther had to worry about the *Schwärmer*, those self-appointed, clandestine preachers who still today insinuate themselves into churches claiming some inner spiritual authority to teach and preach. In Luther’s mind, being *equally* priests through baptism prevents, *prevents*, the very kind of power-grabbing that passes for congregational autonomy or lay authority in churches today. Luther worried about usurpation of such authority “without our permission and election.” Thus, he wrote, “For what is held in common no one may take for themselves without the community’s permission and entrustment.”

²⁰ WA 6: 408, 11-21.

²¹ This is the most important contribution of Goertz’s work (*Allgemeines Priestertum*, 33-79).

²² For another, clearly metaphorical, use of the notion that all Christians are priests, see Luther’s *Freedom of a Christian* (WA 7: 26-29).

Of course, what he was talking about here was the authorization to *exercise* the authority of the public office of ministry. However, in no way, shape or form was he deriving the authority of the office itself from such authorization. Neither the community nor the officeholder possesses the authority of the office indelibly. Instead, the authority of the office rests in the office itself and in the Word of God that created the office and for which Christ established the office, as we will see below.

No wonder that in what followed Luther attacked the *character indelibilis*, that Roman notion that ordination imbues the person's soul with an ontological change. Today, however, we do well to turn Luther's critique not just against the dreams of some lovers of rapprochement with Rome but against those who would give to congregational presidents, pastors, or congregations a similar indelible character—as if any of us could claim the authority of the office for ourselves. *We hold* office, we entrust it to someone, or we allow others to do that entrusting on behalf of the whole church, but we do not possess the office or its authority, nor do we or can we create it.

Luther's principle—a single walk of life but many offices—arose from his conviction concerning the unity of Christ's body. He insisted that any multiplication of walks of life [*Stände*] would imply two bodies of Christ. It was this abhorrence of division in Christ's body that stood at the heart of his criticism of papal grabs for power and its fundamental denial of princely authority and office within the church. Thus, the way to employ Luther's argument today may not be simply to assert the authority of the laity (a power grab not unlike the pope's) but to insist on the church's fundamental unity.

From this it follows that the laity, priests, princes, bishops and—as they call them—spiritual and worldly [walks of life]—truly possess basically

no other distinction than that of their office [*Amt*] and work but *not* of their walk of life [*Stand*]. For they are all part of the spiritual walk of life [*Stand*]*—*truly priests, bishops and popes. However, they do not participate in the same, individual work, no more than is true among priests and monks themselves. This is what Paul said in Romans 12[:4ff.] and 1 Corinthians 12[:12ff.] and Peter said in 1 Peter 2[:9] (as I mentioned above), that we are all one body, with Jesus Christ as the head and each as a member. Christ does not have two bodies or two kinds of bodies*—*one worldly and the other spiritual. He is the one head and has one body.²³

Precisely at this point in the argument, Luther distinguished priests and bishops from others, on the basis of their unique office within Christ’s body: “They are supposed to employ God’s Word and the sacraments. That is their work and office.” (Melanchthon will use this same definition in Augsburg Confession XXVIII.) Luther then defined the offices of others in Christ’s body: secular authorities punish evil and protect the upright. “Each shoemaker, smith, farmer and the like has his own office and trade, and nevertheless all are equally consecrated priests and bishops. And each with his office or work ought to provide aid and service to the others, so that all kinds of work can be set up in a community to support body and soul, just as the members of the body all serve each other.”²⁴ The point of all of these offices is always and only service: whether making shoes, keeping order, or administering God’s Word and sacraments. The

²³ WA 6: 408, 26-35.

²⁴ WA 6: 409, 5-10.

mistaken notion, so prevalent in our power-hungry society and church, that being “consecrated priest or bishop” through our baptism gives each of us individually the right to preach or celebrate the Supper, was the farthest thing from Luther’s mind. In fact, Luther’s point, as becomes clear in the very next sentences, was to buttress his own argument that the Christian magistrate (indeed, *any* magistrate) has the right and duty to punish errant priests and bishops. To support this, he used images of the unity of the body and the necessity of one member of the body to help another. Luther intended to prevent the ruin of the pastoral office by allowing the governmental officials to intervene in ecclesial governance by exercising their office of keeping order.

Luther proceeded to reduce his opponents’ objections against such intervention to absurdity. If Christian princes did not have the right to intervene, “then a person should also prevent tailors, cobblers, stone masons, carpenters, cooks, waiters, farmers and all kinds of tradesmen from producing shoes, clothing, houses, food, drink—or even the payment of the church tax [*Zins*—for the pope, bishops, priests and monks.”²⁵ Of course, the attitude that some churches have regarding the punishment of those guilty of sex crimes may still faintly echo the old notion that the church plays by its own rules and is exempt from governmental intervention.

But, notice what Luther is *not* saying. He is not saying that “carpenters, cooks and waiters” should preach but that they should carry out their own God-given offices. So, if someone wants to invoke Luther’s understanding of the universal priesthood, it should be to pay a higher percentage of their salary to support the pastor or to fix the

²⁵ WA 6: 409, 22-25

leaks in the parsonage roof. Of course, this also means that Christian clergy can never *demand* tax exemptions; our special status with the IRS is simply a matter of governmental largess not a divine right.

Having destroyed this first wall of separation between papacy and laity, Luther then examined the second, namely, that the pope alone can interpret Scripture. Here he used 1 Corinthians 14:30 (that one Christian should yield to another) and John 6:45 (that we are all taught by God). The papacy usurped this function of interpreter and could not use Matthew 16:19 in its favor, since the keys were given to all Christians and had to do with forgiveness of sins. Moreover, Christ prayed in the upper room not only for Peter (as in Luke 22:32) but for all the apostles and the whole church (John 17:9, 20). Luther then appealed to common sense: that there are upright Christians who understand Scripture. Why should they yield to the pope? Otherwise, the Creed would have to be changed to “I believe in the Pope in Rome” instead of the “Holy Christian Church.”

Luther simply refused to allow the pope alone to interpret Scripture. Because Christians have one faith, one gospel and one sacrament, all have authorization to verify and judge (*zuschmecken und urteilen*) what is correct or not in matters of faith. This means that, contrary to canon law, all Christians have authority to judge a non-Christian or anti-Christian pope (or, we could add, bishop or pastor or congregational president). Just as Abraham had to listen to Sarah (Genesis 21:12), who was clearly subject to the patriarch, and Balaam had to listen to his donkey (Numbers 22:28), even more so an upright Christian can upbraid an errant pope. Of course, the key here is not congregational rights but the unity of Word and sacrament and the role of true faith. It is not just any old Christian but “*ein frommer Christ,*” an upright Christian who may correct

the pope. Luther did not see or did not seem concerned about the seeming contradiction. Who determines who is upright? For Luther, this problem of jurisdiction was far less important than destroying papal hegemony over the church.

Even the third wall, constructed to allow popes alone to call councils, fell apart in Luther's eyes, since again the unity of the church and the respect for all members undermined this usurpation of power. Here especially Luther hearkened back to the notion of emergency (*die Not*) and the unity of Christ's body. He employed examples of two of the most feared things in sixteenth-century life: fire in a city and enemy attack. What sense would it make, he asked, if, when a fire broke out in a city, everyone just stood around because they did not have the mayor's authority to fight it? Indeed, everyone has the authority to sound the alarm, as in the case of a surprise attack by the enemy. It was precisely this kind of dire emergency (and not just the selfish demagoguery now plaguing the church) that Luther had in mind. His point? No one in the church has the right to cause it damage! Thus, Luther was neither trying to attack the office of preaching and presiding nor attempting to trumpet the authority of the laity, but rather he was assailing ecclesiastical pyromaniacs of every kind—papal, episcopal, pastoral, congregational or individual. In his view, the first question that needed answering is never "Don't lay persons have rights?" but "Where's the fire?" that is, "Is serious damage being done to the church?" In this regard, Luther's favorite Bible verse was 2 Corinthians 10:8, where Paul speaks of his authority, "which the Lord gave for building you up and not for tearing you down." For Luther, as soon as our question instead becomes "laity rights" or "clergy rights," only the anti-Christ or his cousin wins out.

Excursus: Other “Proofs” for the Existence of das allgemeine Priestertum

Less than a month after he had finished the manuscript for *An den christlichen Adel*, Luther produced a smaller piece on the Lord’s Supper, in which he offered hefty critique of the sacrifice of the Mass.²⁶ In it, he stressed the centrality of Christ’s priesthood and how we bring our praise and needs to Christ, who (according to Romans 8:34) offers us up to God (as opposed to our offering Christ to God). Our true offering occurs by faith, whether connected to the Mass or not. “Thus, it is clear that not only the priest offers the Mass but each individual in his or her own faith. This is the true priestly office through which Christ is offered up before God, which office the priest signifies with the external gestures of the Mass, and all are thus equally spiritual priests before God.”²⁷ Again, here the point is that we are all equally *spiritual* priests. In fact, the notion of a gang of such spiritual priests celebrating the Lord’s Supper was unthinkable to Luther.

Moreover, for Luther the point of such priesthood was hardly power or authority in the local congregation but faith in Christ. That alone makes priests and priestesses, he wrote, using “*Pfaffen*” not “*Priester*” to make his point. The abstraction of these comments to a general doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers”—especially as a way to run congregations and turn pastors into hired guns—was the farthest thing from

²⁶ *Ein Sermon von dem neuen Testament, das ist von der heiligen Messe*, 1520 (WA 6: 349-378).

²⁷ WA 6: 370, 7-11.

Luther's mind. All he was interested in doing here is proving the centrality of faith for all people at the Lord's Supper.²⁸

For all of those who have faith that Christ is Pastor for them in heaven before God's face and who rely on him and through him present their prayers, praise, needs and themselves, and who do not doubt that he does this himself and offers himself for them, they take therein the Sacrament and Testament, either bodily or spiritually, as a sign of all of this and do not doubt that all sins are forgiven and that God has become a gracious, heavenly Father and prepared an eternal life. Look! All those, wherever they are, are the true priests [*pfaffen*] and hold true, proper Mass, and obtain therewith whatever they want. For faith must do all of this. Faith alone is the proper priestly office and does not allow anyone to be anything else. Thus, all Christian men are priests [*pfaffen*] and all women are priestesses [*pfeffyn*], whether young or old, lord or servant, lady or maid, learned or lay. Here there is no difference, even if faith is unequal. Then again, all who do not have such faith but instead presume that the Mass is a sacrifice to be offered up and to perform their office before God are oil painted icons of gods, hold an external mass, do not themselves

²⁸ This is one of the places where Goertz, *Allgemeines Priestertum*, 155f. and 184f., is most confused. By extracting Luther's comments from their original context, he blithely applies this text and others to his theory that the ordained priesthood derives its authority from the priesthood of all believers.

know what they are doing, and “cannot please God, whom it is impossible to please without true faith,” as Paul says in Hebrews 11[:6].²⁹

A final tract sometimes used to “proof text” Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is his *De instituendis ministris Ecclesiae*, written in 1523 for the Utraquist bishops of Bohemia who, despite their relative independence from Rome, still sought confirmation of their appointments as bishop from the pope. However, in his (somewhat mistaken) account of early church life, Luther traced the development of bishops *not* from the “priesthood of all believers” but from the Paterfamilias of Christian households.³⁰ What Luther insisted upon was the reinstatement of the consent of the people in any priestly or episcopal appointments. Here, in an even stronger way than in the previous treatments of the issue, Luther stressed the authority of God’s Word in establishing and defining the public office of ministry.³¹

In the rest of the tract, he contrasted the ministry of the Word over against the pseudo-office to which bishops were in his day ordained: to baptize baptismal fonts, altars and bells rather than human souls. Moreover, they ordained priests not to preach and teach the Word of God but to stand at altars and recite innumerable private masses

²⁹ WA 6: 370, 16-32.

³⁰ WA 12: 171, 17 – 172, 8. Goertz, *Allgemeines Priestertum*, 155f., misses this point completely.

³¹ See, especially, WA 12: 173, 3-6. “Ministerium publicum inquam verbi, quo dispensantur mysteria dei, per sacram ordinationem institui debet, ceu res, quae omnium in Ecclesia et summa et maxima est, in qua tota vis Ecclesiastici status consistit, cum sine verbo nihil constet in Ecclesia et per solum verbum omnia constant.”

for the dead. Here, writing in Latin, Luther contrasted the word *sacerdos* to the word *presbyteros* and showed that in the New Testament only Christ is *sacerdos* or, by extension, all believers in Christ.³² However, ordination created elders, *presbyteroi*, not sacerdotes.

Luther defined the office of such sacerdotal priests as “teaching, preaching and announcing the Word, baptizing, consecrating or administering the Eucharist, absolving or binding sins, praying for others, sacrificing, and judging concerning all doctrines and spirits.”³³ He then proved that each function arose from the Word of God and belonged to this sacerdotal priesthood. However, rather than being proof of the priesthood of all believers, as may seem the case, Luther insisted that the ministry of the Word in such a priesthood was given “to all Christians communally.”³⁴ In fact, he went so far as to approve a distinction made by his opponent, Jerome Emser, who insisted that there were two groups described in the 1 Peter text, all Christians spiritually and communally and some specially and externally.³⁵ After having proved that all hold in common these aspects of the sacerdotal office, Luther then returned to Emser’s point and refined it.

³² WA 12: 179, 38-40. “Sed pergamus et idem ex officiis sacerdotalibus (quae vocant) probemus, omnes Christianos ex aequo esse sacerdotes. Nam illud 1. Petri 2[:9]: ‘Vos estis regale sacerdotium’, et Apoca. 5[:10]: ‘Fecisti nos deo regnum et sacerdotes.’”

³³ WA 12: 180, 2-4.

³⁴ WA 12: 180, 18.

³⁵ WA 12: 180, 24-32. The WA refers to Jerome Emser and Luther’s tracts against him. See especially, *Ein Widerspruch D. Luthers seines Irrthums, erzwungen durch den allerhochgelehrtesten*

But all of these things we have said concerning the common authority [*ius*] of Christians. For, because all of these things are the common property of all Christians, as we have demonstrated, no one is allowed to proceed into the midst [of Christians] by his [or her] own authority and seize for himself [or herself] what belongs to all.³⁶

This was just the point Luther made earlier to undermine the “Zwei Ständelehre” in *To the Christian Nobility*. There is no one, not a congregational pope, a pastoral pope, or a Roman pope, who has that authority of themselves. Instead, the office is given to all in general and requires that everyone be in agreement. For Luther, the proof text for the public office of ministry is 1 Corinthians 14:40—the good order of the congregation and church. “It is one thing to exercise authority publicly,” he wrote, “and another to exercise it in an emergency [*in necessitate*]. In public it is not proper to exercise it without the consent of the whole community [*universitas*] or the church. In an emergency, anyone who wants may act.”³⁷ Citing 1 Corinthians 4:1, Luther called a holder of this public

Priester Gottes, Herrn Hieronymo Emser, Vicarien zu Meißen, 1521/22 (WA 8: 250, 20-26), “Ich Martin Luther bekenn, das ich eyntrechtlich mitt dem hochgelerten herrn und gottis priester, Herr Hierony. Emser, hallte und stymme, das der spruch S. Petri nit alleyn von der geystlichen, sondern auch von der leyplichen, odder, das ichs auffs klerlichst sag, von aller priesterschaftt, die in der Christenheit ist, zuvorstehen sey: das rede ich auß gantzem ernst. Denn ich hab yn der warheit zuvor die sach nit recht angesehen. Nu hoff ich, Luter sey nit mehr ein ketzer, und hab mich mit Emsern gar voreynigt.”

³⁶ WA 12: 189, 17-20.

³⁷ WA 12: 189, 25-27. Goetzen and Härle, in their article in *TRE* 27: 404, misconstrue Luther’s earlier use of 1 Corinthians 14:26 (WA 12: 181, 11-22) by assuming that he was arguing in favor of an

office, a minister, servant, or steward. On the basis of these arguments, then, Luther advised the Bohemian bishops to begin to consecrate their own bishops without waiting for Rome's approval. For all of its radicality, Luther's statement here did not define a priesthood of all believers but an authority for the single Christian estate, what Luther here labeled a sacerdotal priesthood, while leaving room for the servanthood of the public office of ministry.³⁸ Moreover, his point was not to abolish the public office of ministry or derive its authority from the priesthood of all believers but, just the opposite, to empower the Bohemian bishops and clergy to act on behalf of the public ministry of the Word.

Applying the Insight

What difference does this make? Is this not mere playing with words? Can we not still insist upon the time-honored category of the priesthood of all believers as a way of understanding Luther's thought? Of course, I would not have brought you this far into Luther's writings if I thought the answer was yes. Instead, let me show you what happens, first, to our view of Luther's thought and then to our view of contemporary Lutheran understandings of ministry if we remove this category from our thinking.

individualized appropriation of this common priesthood. However, *as Luther's own words indicate*, he was proving that Paul's words did not just applied to "the tonsured," as he called them. "Dic ergo, quid est 'unusquisque'? Quid est 'omnes'? an Rasos solos haec communi voce signat? ... Quare et sacerdotium non nisi unicum et omnibus commune, qui Christiani sunt, non modo iure, sed et praecepto."

³⁸ See especially WA 12: 190, 11-23, where he listed the appropriate names for the public minister of the gospel (e.g., *Ministri, diaconi, Episcopi*, and *dispensatores*).

On the Councils and the Churches

In 1914, Karl Drescher produced volume fifty of Luther's works in the Weimar Edition, which included Luther's most sophisticated treatise on the church, *On the Councils and the Churches*.³⁹ This volume, overseen by Otto Clemen and, more directly by Ferdinand Cohrs, whose work on Luther's catechisms and other early Reformation catechisms is unexcelled, includes a useful introduction to the piece itself. In this introduction, the editors tie the third section of Luther's tract to the concept of the priesthood of all believers.⁴⁰ In contrast to Luther's earlier writing, *To the Christian Nobility*, the editors write, Luther did not invoke the priesthood of all believers, but rather the authority of Scripture itself.⁴¹ A fine explanation, if Luther was working with such a concept as the "priesthood of all believers" in the earlier tracts! However, if, as we have argued, he was not, then a new sense of the unity of Luther's thought on this question emerges.

Indeed, in the third section of his tract, *On the Councils and the Churches*, Luther expressed in fuller form a Reformation ecclesiology, which he had already developed almost twenty years earlier. He insisted that the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, meant

³⁹ *Von den Konziliis und Kirchen* (WA 50: 509-653).

⁴⁰ WA 50: 489. „Konzil und Kirche bedingen sich gegenseitig; beide haben sie ihr Wesen im allgemeinen Priestertum der Gläubigen, beiden gibt Leben und Grund die heilige Schrift. ...

⁴¹ WA 50: 489. „[W]ährend Luther in unserer Schrift alles auf die grundlegende Bedeutung der heiligen Schrift zurückführt, er dort von dem Wesen der Kirche, dem allgemeinen Priestertum der Gläubigen den Ausgang nimmt.“

simply an assembly of people. The important word in defining “church” theologically therefore rested in its adjectives. “Church” was not the Roman structure of popes and bishops; it was not any assembly of people, and it surely was not a building, as people commonly said in Luther’s days and say in ours. Instead, it was a holy assembly, made holy through the activity of the Holy Spirit, who forgives sins, creates faith and restores new life.⁴² Moreover, church did not just consist of the apostles of bygone days, but also included in its assembly not only present-day believers but all believers until the end of the world, wherever Christ works to redeem and the Holy Spirit works to make us holy and bring us to life. Thus, according to Luther, the holy, Christian people are truly *catholica*, universal, and not restricted to one place or time. Wherever the Holy Spirit, using God’s Word, goes about the business of killing the old creature of sin and enlivening the new creature of faith, there is Church.

To recognize this holy Christian assembly, God provided it with certain marks, expanded here by Luther from the simple two (Word and Sacraments) to seven: Word, baptism, Supper, the Keys of absolution, ordination, prayer (including catechism), and cross.⁴³ Throughout this section, Luther contrasted the holiness given by the Holy Spirit through these marks and means of grace to the external holiness of the papal religion of his day.

⁴² WA 50: 624-25. Cf. Gordon Lathrop and Timothy J. Wengert, *Christian Assembly: Marks of the Church in a Pluralistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

⁴³ See Lathrop and Wengert, *Christian Assembly*, 39-43.

However, it is in the fifth mark, ordination, where we can most clearly hear not a break between the “old Luther,” who was grumpy and clericalistic, and the bold, happy, pietistic “young Luther,” but the very continuity in thought that defined both a single Christian walk of life (*Stand*) and a variety of offices (*Ämter*).⁴⁴ In 1520, he emphasized the single *Stand*; here he concentrated on the public office. Thus, he began the section with a statement that superficially directly contradicted his earlier position.

For one [633] must have bishops, pastors or preachers, who publicly and specially distribute, offer, and practice the above-mentioned four things or holy objects, because of and in the name of the church but much more because of the institution of Christ, as St. Paul says in Ephesians 4[:11], “He gives gifts to people.” He gave some to be Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Teachers, Rulers, etc.⁴⁵

He then appealed to the sense of order and 1 Corinthians 14:40, as above, but now to emphasize the necessity of the public office.⁴⁶ So convinced was Luther of the

⁴⁴ This notion of the continuity of Luther’s thought is also one of the Goertz’s conclusions in *Allgemeines Priestertum*, 30 (where those holding the opposing viewpoints are listed), although he arrives at this conclusion without investigating whether “priesthood of all believers” was ever a category of Luther’s thought.

⁴⁵ WA 50: 632, 36 – 633, 5.

⁴⁶ WA 50: 633, 5-11. “For the general populace cannot do this but must entrust it to someone or let it be entrusted. Otherwise, what would happen if each wanted to speak or distribute, and no one would yield to the other. It has to be entrusted to one person alone, and that one must be allowed to preach,

existence of this mark of the church that he had to explain why some people (women, children and the mentally challenged) would naturally be excluded from this office.⁴⁷ (As is often the case in Luther's arguments, he only introduced this argument *because* he realized that there was really no reason why especially women should be excluded.)⁴⁸ He further had to explain why the Lutheran church had no prophetic or apostolic offices, while the Roman church, in the person of the pope, did. He argued that the pope and his followers were more likely apostles of the devil because they did not know as much about Scripture as a seven-year-old girl (perhaps he had his own Magdalena in mind).⁴⁹ Apostles and prophets will continue to exist in the church until the world's end, even if they have other names. For Luther the point was never the worthiness or honor of the officeholder but the Word of God to which they bear witness. After a long tirade attacking the pope's strictures against married clergy,⁵⁰ Luther turned to other marks of the church, but not before concluding, "Where you see such offices or offices holders, there you may know for a certainty that the holy Christian people must be there. For the Church cannot exist without such bishops, pastors, preachers and priests. And, again,

baptize, absolve, and distribute the sacrament. All the others must be satisfied and allow this to happen. Where you see this happening, then it is certain that God's people and the holy, Christian people are there."

⁴⁷ WA 50: 633, 12-24.

⁴⁸ He argued on the basis of Scripture and natural law.

⁴⁹ WA 50: 633, 25 – 634, 10.

⁵⁰ WA 50: 634, 34 – 641, 16.

they cannot exist without the church; they must be together.”⁵¹ They must be together. This is what Luther had seen that the church of his day lacked in 1520; nineteen years later, the need was still the same.

Finding Our (Lutheran) Way in the Twenty-First Century

Several years ago, during the debate over the proposed agreement between the ELCA and the Episcopal Church, “Called to Common Mission,” I was asked to address the Southeast Pennsylvania Synod Assembly on how Lutherans understood the laity and the clergy. I had five minutes for each topic, immediately before and after lunch. It was my first sentence that grabbed their attention and surprised, nay, rather, shocked the bishop. I announced, “There are no lay voting members at this synod assembly.” Of course, by the time I announced after lunch that there were also no clergy voting members, no one was listening.

The fact remains. We are, first and foremost, members of a church—and I mean the *Christian* church—in which, standing before God, there are no lay or clerical members anywhere. There are not two different estates of Christians with two different standings before God. There is only one body of Christians, all of whom are called to serve one another with their gifts where they are. The elimination of all essential differences between clergy and laity, however, does not lead to pietism’s haughty dismissal or denigration of the pastoral office. Rather, as Luther realized, by erasing this distinction we all become members of the same single, united Body of Christ. Anything

⁵¹ WA 50: 641, 16-19.

that anyone does to undermine that unity—in the name of either clerical or lay power—contradicts directly Luther’s concern.

Second, this unity of Christ’s Body—a gift of the Holy Spirit—does not mean uniformity of action. Each of us is called to serve with our own distinctive gifts. Shoemakers can make shoes; congregational leaders can lead and administer; and pastors can (and must) preach and preside. The wholesale usurpation by officeholders in one office of the duties and responsibilities in another—except in the case of a true emergency (which is then hardly usurpation)—has no place in the church, despite its popularity among some demagogues today. There is good order in our Lutheran churches today. Congregational leaders do not belong in the pulpit; the pastor is not above the law—whether exercised in the congregation or synod or by the state. Again, the point for Luther is unity—in this case, the unity in diversity that any healthy body demonstrates.

Even more centered upon unity is a third point. The sacerdotal priesthood belongs to Christ alone, who through faith shares it *in toto* with the whole church—baptism, Supper, preaching, absolution, prayer, suffering. You see, the marks of the church in 1539 are the marks of this priesthood in 1523. Because of this, no one can usurp the public function of this priesthood to him- or herself. As long as we peer over the fence and imagine that only Rome or the Roman priesthood is guilty of this, we will miss the most egregious practices in our own backyards. Every time there is a vacancy in a parish, some congregational leader thinks God (or at least the bishop) has died and left him or her in charge. Bishops and district presidents are often elected on the basis of charm or power politics and not on the basis of their fidelity to the proclamation of the

gospel! Pastors and congregations imagine that they alone define church and spurn the advice, counsel, and admonition of other congregations, pastors, bishops or leaders.

Worse yet, pastors think their calling is to do everything except exercise the public office of ministry. It is now the latest thing to jettison Word, Baptism, Supper, Absolution, Prayer, and—above all else—suffering from the sacerdotal estate we all share and from the office of pastor some of us are called to. How can the church grow when the marks of the church, the priesthood, and the public office are abandoned?

The Augsburg Confession states succinctly that no one may exercise the public office without a proper call, and for Luther that call includes approval by all involved. But the point is less who is involved in calling as it is in what builds up the church. In fact, he measured everything in terms of unity and, to use an old word, edification. We are on earth to build one another up in unity, not to insist upon our rights or grab the office of others or run it through the mud.

Fourth, there is the issue of baptism, preaching, and the Lord's Supper. A graduate student recently told me the story of his vacation in Montana where he and his family visited a congregation when the pastor was away for a synod function. Without any explanation, some lay persons climbed into the pulpit and spoke and then led the congregation in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Where was the emergency? Where was the pastor? Now, to be sure, even when we do stupid things God still manages to use our broken words and bad form. But, what bothered my student—and me—was not that from time to time, in certain circumstances (whether quite at what I would define as the level of emergency or not) someone other than the one called to public ministry may be called upon to do these things. Rather, what bothered us was the complete lack of

explanation. It was as if what that pastor did in that congregation was just a job, easily done by anyone, or as if the pastor's "real" job had nothing to do with the public Christian acts of "bath, table, Word, and prayer" but with other things. It is hard to imagine what those things might be.

Part of the problem is that few recognize the difficulty of performing the public office of ministry well. Certainly, if I were being wheeled into an operating room, and a janitor at the hospital came up to me and announced that my heart surgeon was on vacation and he was taking her place, I think I would run away as fast as my wobbly knees could carry me. It is just as much an art to recognize the distinction between law and gospel in the biblical text and to preach it well. Of course, these days in some corners of the church, even reading Scripture, let alone preaching on it, has become *passé*, so perhaps in those so-called churches it really does not matter who presides.

There are, of course, emergencies, in which a respected, well-trained member of a congregation may be called upon to comfort the faithful on a particular Sunday. Given the shortage of ordained public ministers, the number of times that will happen in the future is bound to increase. Then, too, there are the more widespread vacancies in rural or urban areas, where synods, districts, bishops and presidents have taken a variety of approaches to the problem. As I and others have argued elsewhere, such "lay" ministers are public ministers in every sense of the term—except lacking ordination itself. One wonders if, by refusing to ordain such folks, ordination has become not public attestation of a call to public ministry but rather approval for three or four years at seminary. Although we must be concerned for the anti-intellectual bent in our society that would have janitors do the ecclesial work of theological heart surgeons, we must also be willing

to acknowledge the real public ministries of real people. They might just be EMTs and need more oversight and have limited mobility, but what is that compared to the mark of the church that sets apart a person for this public office?

Finally, let us leave debates over ontology and function to Plato and John Stuart Mill. Instead, let us meditate upon these verses from Paul, “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” There is one body, not two estates. There are many offices that make us interrelated to each other in service. What is the office and service of the public minister of the gospel? No matter how unworthy, Philip Melancthon stated in the Apology, such persons, “represent the person of Christ on account of the call of the church and do not represent their own persons. . . . When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they offer them in the stead and place of Christ.”⁵² That service, in essence and in function, means to die for the little ones whom God has given us to serve. And *that* is the office of those called and ordained public ministers in our churches: to distribute publicly the gifts of Christ’s priesthood that, through Baptism, we all share in faith, whatever our duties and offices in the church may be.

⁵² Apology of the Augsburg Confession, VII/VIII.28, translated by Charles Arand, in: *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 178.