

## What Does God Expect of Parents and Grandparents?

### **Luther's Doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers: The Importance for Today**

Rachel Ciano · January 8, 2020

When the spark was lit for the reform of church doctrine and practice in 1517, not even Martin Luther himself could have perceived what was about to be unleashed. For Luther, his rediscovery in the Bible of the doctrine of justification by faith alone had immense implications for a whole array of doctrinal beliefs and church practices. One key implication was the equality that it created among those who trust Christ alone for their salvation. For Luther, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was an implication of the doctrine of justification by faith.

While Luther seems to have never actually used the term “priesthood of all believers” (the closest he comes is “general priesthood of all baptized Christians”),<sup>[1]</sup> he repeatedly referred to baptized believers as “priests.”<sup>[2]</sup> The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers meant that all who have faith in Christ and are baptized are designated priests and share in Christ’s royal priesthood. This meant that every believer has equal access to the Father through Jesus. The corollary is that every believer has the responsibility to act as a priest to other believers, to minister to them, particularly through proclaiming Scripture to them.

### **One spiritual estate**

Luther maintained that there is no spiritual divide between priests and laity; there is simply “one estate” to which all baptized believers belong.<sup>[3]</sup> Because justification by faith puts all baptized believers on equal footing, there are no tiers of spirituality or hierarchy in accessing God. Luther needed to retrieve the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers because, from the third century onwards, a gulf had opened between ordained and lay people, until it reached something of a chasm in the sixteenth century. This gap between the spiritual world and temporal world de-sanctified the earthly realm and created a chasm between the two, exalting the spiritual world over the temporal world.

It was this view of two worlds, two realms, two estates that Luther considered unscriptural. The priesthood of all believers meant that there could only be one world, one realm, one spiritual estate—all of which belonged to God. Luther maintained:

It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are to be called the “spiritual estate;” princes, lords, artisans, and farmers the “temporal estate.” [On the contrary] . . . all Christians are truly of the “spiritual estate,” and there is among them no difference at all but that of office.<sup>[4]</sup>

How then, if all believers are of equal standing, is the church to carry out its ministry? How was Luther to have “priests” among the priesthood of all believers?

### **Luther's implementation of a functional priesthood**

For the sake of order in churches, Luther maintained a distinction in the role and office of different believers. This emphasis on order was particularly important for Luther, for some Reformation ideas had been turned into cause for disorder among the Anabaptists, and Luther would have none of that. This was not an ontological distinction but rather a functional distinction:

There is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests . . . 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.”<sup>[5]</sup>



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Those who are to perform the office of a “priest” are to be chosen from among the priests in the congregation because “we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians. But the priests, as we call them, are ministers chosen from among us. All that they do is done in our name; the priesthood is nothing but a ministry.”<sup>[6]</sup> Thus, a “priest” is to be chosen by the consent of the priests of the congregation and apart from self-promotion: “Because we are all priests of equal standing, no one must push himself forward and take it upon himself, without our consent and election, to do that for which we all have equal authority. For no one dare take upon himself what is common to all without the authority and consent of the community.”<sup>[7]</sup>

If a priest is a priest by function, not essence, what is his function? For Luther, the primary responsibility of a priest is to speak God’s Word to the people of the congregation by faithfully carrying out the ministry of the Word and sacrament.<sup>[8]</sup> Luther guarded the ministry of the Word by guarding the ordained office of the priest; for him, ordination was about choosing preachers.<sup>[9]</sup> “The duty of a priest is to preach. . . . It is the ministry of the Word that makes the priest and the bishop.”<sup>[10]</sup>

When Luther set forth his first outline for a church service in *An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* (1523), he wanted to correct abuses that had arisen through neglect of God’s Word.<sup>[11]</sup> He emphasized: “And this is the sum of the matter: Let everything be done so that the Word may have free course instead of the prattling and rattling that has been the rule up to now. We can spare everything except the Word.”<sup>[12]</sup> **The priesthood of all believers meant that there could only be one world, one realm, one spiritual estate—all of which belonged to God.** [CLICK TO TWEET](#)

Viewing the priesthood as a function and office rather than an ontological status also meant Luther believed that ordination is not a permanent state; the priesthood is not irrevocable as in the Roman Catholic tradition. The role of priest is simply a ministry that can be started and stopped as required, not part of the essence of the person. Indeed, someone who has served in the role of priest can again become a lay person, as Luther explained: “I cannot understand why one who has been made a priest cannot again become a layman; for the sole difference between him and a layman is his ministry.”<sup>[13]</sup>

### Implications for today

What might Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers mean for us? Here are a few suggestions. First, we are to remember that leaders and laity are both justified by faith alone in Christ alone. We are to respect and give due honor to those who serve us in a leadership role in the church, however we are not to invest them with some special spiritual power. Likewise, those in a leadership role are not to lord it over those in their care but recognize their same standing before God.

However, we must be careful not to misapply Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers; he didn’t want to bring pastors down, but rather wanted to raise the bar for congregation members. All of us are priests, and so we must exercise that function, especially in ministering the Word of God to one another, but also in praying for one another, hearing each other’s confession and assuring one another of divine forgiveness, serving one another including physical provision (Phil 4:18; Heb 13:16), ultimately offering our whole being as a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1; notice the priestly language). Luther particularly emphasized the priestly role in the household, which is why catechisms were so important to him – may we be encouraged in the God-given duty of instructing the children in our care in the ways of the Lord.

Second, by doing away with the demarcation between the spiritual and temporal realms, Luther invested a dignity in vocation whereby a Christian may live a whole life in worship of God (Rom 12:1). Each daily activity, from the mundane to the material, from the remunerated to the unpaid, is a realm in which to glorify God. Whereas the world tempts us to think that the value of a task is wrapped up in the amount paid to do it, we are offered a new way – all tasks are a way to glorify God as priests, which is the ultimate bottom line at the end of the day.



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Third, Luther encourages us to remember that the function of a priest (or pastor, elder, minister, bishop) is to correctly present the Word of God to people under their care, recognizing that it is through the Spirit-inspired Word of God that the Spirit works in people's lives.<sup>[14]</sup> According to Scripture, the key requirement that an elder/bishop should meet—a qualification that is distinguishable from every other Christian—is being “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2); this competency entails that the elder/bishop must “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9). Amidst the many pulls on a pastor's time, he cannot be allowed to neglect the Word and prayer, asking that God's Word may do its work in people's lives by God's Spirit. May we do all we can to encourage and ensure that those in Christian leadership persevere in presenting the Word of God to us. In the words of Luther, “we can spare everything except the Word.”

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### Endnotes

[1] Martin Luther, *Selected Psalms II*, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-86), 13:332.

[2] Uche Anizor and Hank Voss, *Representing Christ: A Vision for the Priesthood of All Believers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 18.

[3] Luther differentiated between two estates and one estate in “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” in *Luther's Works*, 44:129. See later discussion.

[4] This is Luther's gloss on Paul's affirmation, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” in *Luther's Works*, 44:129.

[5] Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” in *Luther's Works*, 44:129.

[6] Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” in *Luther's Works*, 36:113.

[7] Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” in *Luther's Works*, 44:129.

[8] For Luther, a very close connection exists between the Word of God—that which is preached and received by faith—and the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper—that which is enacted by means of the physical elements of water, bread, and wine and received by faith as the promise of the forgiveness of sins.

[9] Kuhn, *Celebrating the Reformation*, 251.

[10] Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” in *Luther's Works*, 36:115. The ministry of the Word was the primary differentiating characteristic of Lutheran priests. See *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article 24, in *The Book of Concord: Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 267.

[11] Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earney, *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018), 77.



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[12] Martin Luther, “Concerning the Order for Public Worship,” in *Liturgy and Hymns of Luther’s Works*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold, trans. Paul Zeller Strodach, 73 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 53:9-14. See Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 77.

[13] Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” in *Luther’s Works*, 36:117.

[14] Luther in particular stressed the connection between the Word of God and the Spirit of God: “Because God has now permitted his holy gospel to go forth, he deals with us in two ways: First, outwardly, and second, inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the preached Word, or the gospel, and through the visible signs of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit and faith. But this is always in such a way and in this order that the outward means must precede the inward means, and the inward means comes after through the outward means. So, then, God has willed that he will not give up anyone the inward gifts [of the Spirit and faith] except through the outward means [of the Word and the sacraments].” Martin Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments,” in *Luther’s Works*, 40:83.

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