

## The “Early” Luther on Priesthood of All Believers, Office of the Ministry, and Ordination

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Devoting a conference to the “late” Luther reminds us that there is also an “early” Luther; and if we are interested in observing changes in Luther’s thinking, we need a starting point, a base line, from which to measure any development. In accordance with Jim Kittelson’s suggestion, for the purposes of this seminar, I have examined writings from 1520 and 1523 in order to establish the early Luther’s central ideas regarding our topic. By 1520, Luther was clearly operating from an evangelical perspective, and his theology was developing rapidly in response to his papal opponents. This opposition was not only theoretical but also practical, so Luther often wrote in order to justify a course of action. These circumstances led him to new understandings of the priesthood of all believers, the ministry, and ordination.

But now, precisely, which works of Luther do we examine for his early remarks regarding the ministry and its connection to the priesthood of believers? Jim has suggested three such works, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*<sup>1</sup> and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*<sup>2</sup> (both from 1520) and *That a Christian Congregation or Assembly has the Power to Judge All doctrine and to Call and Dismiss All Teachers, as proven by the Scriptures*<sup>3</sup> (1523). To these, I have added another, Luther’s *Concerning the Ministry*<sup>4</sup> (addressed to the Bohemian Brethren in Prague, also in 1523).

Returning to the earliest of these, *To the Christian Nobility*, let me share with you some of my observations.

It is well-known that Luther relied upon the state to protect and to advance the Reformation; but clearly this was an accident of history, since Luther was driven to look for support from the elector of Saxony and other German rulers by the intransigence of church officials, their persistent refusal to accommodate Luther’s understanding of the gospel. But was there any justification for turning to the temporal authorities? In this work, Luther presents a biblical rationale for calling upon the nobility for help – a rationale that turned out to be basic to his whole sense

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<sup>1</sup> *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung.* WA 6:404-69.

<sup>2</sup> *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium.* WA 6:497-573.

<sup>3</sup> *Dass ein christliche Versammlung oder Gemeine Recht und Macht habe, alle Lehre zu urtheilen and Lehrer zu berufen, ein und abzusetzen, Grund und Ursach aus der Schrift.* WA 11:408-416.

<sup>4</sup> *De instituendis ministris Ecclesiae.* WA 12:169-196.

of Christian community, viz., the priesthood of all believers along with the accompanying doctrine of vocation.

Of course, the bulk of Luther's address is a list of issues that a church council needs to treat and Luther's concrete proposals for solving them. Such *gravamina* were not new with Luther; but what was new in this work was Luther's offering a theological rationale for the emperor and German nobility to take matters into their own hands instead of waiting for the papacy.

So Luther begins his work, not with the complaints, but by dismantling the "three walls" that the papacy had erected to preserve itself from criticism and correction: (1) that the spiritual power, i.e., the clergy, is above the temporal, i.e., the princes and all laity; (2) that only the pope can give a definitive interpretation to the Scriptures; and (3) that only the pope can summon a church council. Luther's answer to all three is his doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers."

First of all, Luther maintains that all Christians are equally Christian so that none is superior to any other as far as possessing what is essential to the Church, "because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people" (LW 44:127).<sup>5</sup> In what really counts, relationship with God, there is no difference between Christians. All are in the same situation under the Law – in desperate need of a Savior; and under the Gospel, God saves all in precisely the same way – the redeeming work of Christ that God imparts through preaching and baptism and that becomes a person's own possession through faith. In this, every Christian is precisely the same as every other.

As Luther says, "All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office."<sup>6</sup> Relying upon 1 Corinthians 12, which describes the Church as the body of Christ and each member a part of that body, Luther acknowledges differences between Christians, not as questions of status, however, but as occasions for service to others. All are not the same in what God has given them to do, but they are all the same in what God has given them to be in the Church, viz., His very own people.

All Christians, therefore, have the same status. Citing 1 Peter 2:9 ("You are a royal priesthood and a priestly realm") and Rev. 5:9-10 ("Thou has

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<sup>5</sup> WA 6:407.17-19: "*das macht allis, das wir eine tauff, ein Evangelium, eynen glauben haben, unnd sein gleyche Christen, den die tauff, Evangelium und glauben, die machen allein geistlich und Christen volck.*"

<sup>6</sup> WA 6:407.13-15: "*Dan alle Christen sein warhafftig geystlichs stands, unnd ist unter yhn kein unterscheyd, denn des ampts halben allein.*"

made us to be priests and kings by thy blood”), Luther describes that status as “priest” and ascribes it to every Christian, “As far as that goes, we are all consecrated priests through baptism” (127).<sup>7</sup> So what differentiates Christians is simply the work that God has given them to do:

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....But they do not all have the same work to do.<sup>8</sup> (129)

As part of the divine economy, God has given to each Christian a particular calling in this life whereby he serves others, “Everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work or office so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one another” (130).<sup>9</sup>

As examples of such vocations in the body of Christ, Luther mentions cobblers, smiths, peasants, and temporal authorities besides the clergy. But what is noteworthy about the last, those who have as their vocation “the administration of the word of God and the sacraments,”<sup>10</sup> is that they are exercising an authority that belongs in the first instance to every Christian. For besides designating one’s *status* before God, Luther’s concept of the priesthood of believers also includes *spiritual power* in the Church.

Although it is not Luther’s purpose in his address *To the Christian Nobility* fully to develop his ideas regarding the office of the ministry, he does make it clear that the “priesthood of all believers” is the basis for this office. No human being, not even bishop or pope, with all of the ceremonial rigmarole that characterized medieval piety, can authorize someone to “say mass or preach a sermon or give absolution” (128).<sup>11</sup> Only God can - and does! - in baptism, “For whoever comes out of the water of

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<sup>7</sup> WA 6:407.22-23: “Dem nach szo werden wir allesampt durch die tauff zu priestern geweyhet.”

<sup>8</sup> WA 6:408.26-30: “Szo folget ausz dissem, das leye, priester, fursten, bischoff, und wie sie sagen, geistlich und weltlich, keynen andern unterscheyd ym grund warlich haben, den des ampts odder wercks halben, unnd nit des stands halbenn, dan sie seyn alle geystlichs stands...aber nit gleichs eynerley wercks.”

<sup>9</sup> WA 6:409.7-10: “ein yglich sol mit seinem ampt odder werck denn andern nutzlich unnd dienstlich sein, das also viellerley werck alle in eine gemeyn gerichtet sein, leyp und sellen zufoddern, gleich wie die glidmasz des corpers alle eyns dem andern dienet.”

<sup>10</sup> WA 6:409.3: “sie das wort gottis unnd die sacrament sollen handeln.”

<sup>11</sup> WA 6:407.27-28: “noch mesz halten, noch predigenn, noch absolvieren.”

baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop, and pope” (129).<sup>12</sup>

But this does not mean that anyone can just up and decide for himself that he is going to preach today since he has been baptized. Although every believer has priestly authority by virtue of his baptism, God has given such authority for the sake of the Christian community to be exercised on its behalf. Therefore, as Luther says, “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” (129).<sup>13</sup> Thus, in Luther’s thinking, the claims of the Christian community temper individual rights.

In *To the Christian Nobility*, therefore, Luther’s conclusion regarding those who actually do the preaching of the Word and administering of the sacraments in the Church is that they possess not a special status (*Stand*) but a special calling or work (*Amt oder Werk*) to exercise an authority that belongs to all for the sake of all. For Luther, ordination by a bishop cannot confer new powers upon a man (he already has them in his baptism) nor any kind of permanent status (“*characteres indelebiles*”), for all Christians have the same status. But rather, “when a bishop consecrates, it is nothing else than that in the place and stead of the whole community, all of whom have like power, he takes a person and charges him to exercise this power on behalf of others” (128).<sup>14</sup> And if such a man is deposed from office, he is no longer in that office but is “a peasant or a townsman like anybody else” (129).<sup>15</sup>

In the second of the works of the early Luther that treat topics related to our theme, the *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther discusses and dismantles the medieval sacramental system. In a measured but powerful way, Luther subjects each of the seven medieval sacraments (baptism, eucharist, penance, confirmation, marriage, ordination, and extreme unction) to the critique of God’s Word and concludes that “there are, strictly speaking, but two sacraments in the church of God – baptism and the bread [i.e.,

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<sup>12</sup> WA 6:408.11-12: “Dan was ausz der tauff krochen ist, das mag sich rumen, das es schon priester, Bischoff und Bapst geweyhet sey.”

<sup>13</sup> WA 6:408.13-17: “Dan weyl wir alle gleich priester sein, musz sich niemant selb erfur thun und sich unterwinden, an unszer bewilligen und erwelen das zuthun, des wir alle gleychen gewalt haben, Den was gemeyne ist, mag niemandt on der gemeyne willen und befehle an sich nehmen.”

<sup>14</sup> WA 6:407.29-31: “Drumb ist des Bischoffs weyhen nit anders, den als wen er an stat und person der gantzen samlung eynen ausz dem hauffen nehme, die alle gleiche gewalt haben, und yhm befilh, die selben gewalt fur die andern auszzurichten.”

<sup>15</sup> WA 6:408.20-21: “wo ehr abgesetzt, ist ehr ein bawr odder burger wie die andern.”

eucharist]. For only in these two do we find both the divinely instituted sign and the promise of forgiveness of sins” (LW 36:124).<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, in his discussion of each rite, Luther’s evangelical perspective is basic, and this is true also in his treatment of ordination. For the purposes of this seminar, it is particularly noteworthy to hear Luther express himself this way regarding ordination: “Of this sacrament the church of Christ knows nothing; it is an invention of the church of the pope” (106).<sup>17</sup> Of course, Luther’s entire discussion is directed against the medieval, papal form of ordination. Nevertheless, it is also important to recognize that Luther’s argument amounts to a rejection of *any* rite of ordination as a sacrament, i.e., an outward sign to which God has attached a promise of forgiveness. Luther writes, “Not only is there nowhere any promise of grace attached to it, but there is not a single word said about it in the whole New Testament. Now it is ridiculous to put forth as a sacrament of God something that cannot be proved to have been instituted by God” (106-107).<sup>18</sup>

In this connection, Luther rejects the notion that the Church can create her own sacraments, i.e., “new divine promises of grace...since the church is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” Luther dismisses such thinking by arguing that the promises make the Church and not the other way around, “The Word of God is incomparably superior to the church, and in this Word the church, being a creature, has nothing to decree, ordain, or make, but only to be decreed, ordained, and made” (107).<sup>19</sup> It is impossible therefore to take a rite of the Church like ordination and turn it into a means of grace.

This does not mean, however, that Luther had no use for ordination as an installation ceremony for newly called pastors. In fact, as early as 1525, Luther himself ordained Georg Rörer into the office of the ministry and the Weimar edition of Luther’s works has printed some ordination rites used by Luther (cf. WA 38:411f.).<sup>20</sup> So here in the *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther is quite willing to recognize ordination as “a certain rite by

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<sup>16</sup> WA 6:572.12-15: “*Quo fit, ut, si rigide loqui volumus, tantum duo sunt in Ecclesia dei sacramenta, Baptismus et panis, cum in his solis et institutum divinitus signum et promissionem remissionis peccatorum videamus.*”

<sup>17</sup> WA 6:560.20-21: “*Hoc sacramentum Ecclesia Christi ignorat, inventumque est ab Ecclesia Papae.*”

<sup>18</sup> WA 6:560.21-24: “*Non enim solum nullam habet promissionem gratiae ullibi positam, sed ne verbo quidem eius meminit totum novum testamentum. Ridiculum autem est asserere pro sacramento dei, quod a deo institutum nusquam potest monstrari.*”

<sup>19</sup> WA 6:560.31-561.1: “*Nec habet Ecclesia potestatem novas promissiones gratiae divinas statuere, sicut quidam garriunt, ... cum regatur spiritu sancto. ... Verbum dei enim supra Ecclesiam est incomparabiliter, in quo nihil statuere, ordinare, facere, sed tantum statui, ordinari, fieri habet tanquam creatura.*”

<sup>20</sup> See also LW 53:122-26.

which the church chooses its preachers” (36:113)<sup>21</sup> but *not* as a sacrament. “I do not hold that this rite, which has been observed for so many centuries, should be condemned; but in sacred things I am opposed to the invention of human fictions. And it is not right to give out as divinely instituted what was not divinely instituted” (107).<sup>22</sup>

Besides his rejection of ordination as anything more than an ecclesiastical ceremony, in this section of the *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther also addresses once again the nature of the office of the ministry. For one thing, he charges the Roman church with transforming ordination into a sacrament in order to exalt the clergy over the laity:

Trusting the external anointing by which their hands are consecrated, in the tonsure and in vestments, they not only exalt themselves above the rest of the lay Christians, who are only anointed with the Holy Spirit, but regard them almost as dogs and unworthy to be included with themselves in the church. Hence they are bold to demand, to exact, to threaten, to urge, to oppress, as much as they please. In short, the sacrament of ordination has been and still is an admirable device for establishing all the horrible things that have been done hitherto in the church, and are yet to be done. Here Christian brotherhood has perished, here shepherds have been turned into wolves, servants into tyrants, churchmen into worse than worldlings (112).<sup>23</sup>

For Luther, therefore, a false view of ordination accompanies a false view of the ministry. Once again, in order to explain the nature of the true public ministry of the Church, Luther has recourse to his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, from among whom some are chosen to exercise a special service in the church. After citing 1 Peter 2:9 again, Luther says, “Therefore 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

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<sup>21</sup> WA 6:564.16-17: “*Sacramentum ordinis aliud esse non possit quam ritus quidam eligendi Concionatoris in Ecclesia.*”

<sup>22</sup> WA 6:560.24-27: “*Non quod damnandum censeam eum ritum per tanta saecula celebratum, sed quod in rebus sacris nolim humana commenta fingi, nec liceat astruere aliquod divinitus ordinatum quod divinitus ordinatum non est.*”

<sup>23</sup> WA 6:563.22-564.5: “*Fiducia corporalis unctionis, quo manus eorum consecrantur, deinde rasurae et vestium non modum caeteris laicis Christianis, qui spiritu sancto uncti sunt, sese praeferunt, sed ferme ut canes indignos, qui cum eis in Ecclesia numerantur, habeant. Hinc quidvis mandare, exigere, minari, urgere, premere audent. Summa, sacramentum ordinis pulcherrima machina fuit et est ad stabilienda universa portenta quae hactenus facta sunt et adhuc fiunt in Ecclesia. Hic perit fraternitas Christiana: hic ex pastoribus lupi, ex servis tyranni, ex Ecclesiasticis plus quam mundani facti sunt.*”

that they do is done in our name; the priesthood is nothing but a ministry” (113).<sup>24</sup>

And what is the contents of this ministry? To preach and to teach the Word of God – nothing more and nothing less. Luther writes, “It is the ministry of the Word that makes the priest and the bishop” (115)<sup>25</sup> and again, “The priesthood is properly nothing but the ministry of the Word – the Word, I say; not the law, but the gospel” (116).<sup>26</sup>

Once again, Luther is emphatic that this ministry belongs in the first instance to every believer, “Let everyone...who knows himself to be a Christian, be assured of this, that we are all equally priests, that is to say, we have the same power in respect to the Word and the sacraments.” But just as emphatically, Luther goes on to say that “no one may make use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior. (For what is the common property of all, no individual may arrogate to himself, unless he is called.)” And therefore, “this ‘sacrament’ of ordination is nothing else than a certain rite whereby one is called to the ministry of the church” (116).<sup>27</sup>

Much of Luther’s concern here is to correct Rome’s notion of a special priesthood standing over God’s people in order to recite the liturgy and to sacrifice the mass:

Those who are ordained only to read the canonical hours and to offer masses are indeed papal priests, but not Christian priests, because they not only do not preach, but are not even called to preach....a priesthood of that sort is a different estate altogether from the office of preaching. Thus they are hour-reading and mass-saying priests – sort of living idols called priests – really such priests as Jeroboam ordained...taken from the lowest dregs of the people” [1 Kings 12:31] (113).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> WA 6:564.11-13: “*Quare omnes sumus sacerdotes, quotquot Christiani sumus. Sacerdotes vero quos vocamus ministri sunt ex nobis electi, qui nostro nomine omnia faciant et sacerdotium aliud nihil est quam ministerium.*”

<sup>25</sup> WA 6:566.9: “*Ministerium verbi facit sacerdotem et Episcopum.*”

<sup>26</sup> WA 6:566.32-34: “*Sacerdotium proprie esse non nisi ministerium verbi, verbi, inquam, non legis sed Euangelii.*”

<sup>27</sup> WA 6:566.26-32: “*Esto itaque certus et sese agnoscat quicumque se Christianum esse cognoverit, omnes nos aequaliter esse sacerdotes, hoc est, eandem in verbo et sacramento quocunque habere potestatem, verum non licere quenquam hac ipsa uti nisi consensu communitatis aut vocatione maioris (Quod enim omnium est communiter, nullus singulariter potest sibi arrogare, donec vocetur), Ac per hoc ordinis sacramentum, si quicquam est, esse nihil aliud, quam ritum quendam vocandi alicuius in ministerium Ecclesiasticum.*”

<sup>28</sup> WA 6:564.24-31: “*Qua re eos, qui tantum ad horas Canonicas legendas et Missas offerendas ordinantur, esse quidem papisticos, sed non Christianos sacerdotes, quia non modo non praedicant sed nec vocantur ad praedicandum,...ut sit sacerdotium eiusmodi*

Luther will have nothing to do with “indelible character,” for he sees it as a principal means whereby the papacy has placed itself above the laity and continues to enslave them. Do away with such ideas and sacramental ordination generally, Luther argues, and the “papacy will scarcely survive,” for then “we shall realize that we are all equal by every right. Having cast off the yoke of tyranny, we shall know that he who is a Christian has Christ; and that he who has Christ has all things that are Christ’s, and can do all things” (117).<sup>29</sup>

As in the first work, *To the Christian Nobility*, so here in the second, the *Babylonian Captivity*, the controversy with Rome led Luther to affirm spiritual egalitarianism while reorienting the public ministry of the Church to the task of preaching the gospel. But in both works, the argument regarding the priesthood of believers and the ministry was still somewhat theoretical, since there were no specific cases as yet to which Luther was applying his doctrine. Putting theory into practice, however, would become Luther’s challenge in the next few years as the two additional treatises surveyed for this introduction indicate.

The third of the works of the early Luther that I have looked at is *That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Power to Judge All Teaching, and to Call and Dismiss All Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture* (1523). Luther addressed this treatise originally to the town of Leisnig that had adopted the Reformation in the spring of 1522 but was having difficulty implementing it because the right of patronage, which included both the right to name parish priests and certain claims on parish revenues, belonged to the nearby Cistercian monastery. In order to justify implementing the Reformation in their town, therefore, Leisnig’s leaders requested Luther to prepare a biblical rationale for their proceeding on their own to call their own pastors, reorganize their finances, and reform their worship. The result was actually three writings – one devoted to each of these topics. This one, of course, is devoted to the question of whether the people of Leisnig had the right to appoint and dismiss their own clergy – to which Luther responds with a resounding “Yes.”

First of all, Luther addresses the issue of authority. Who has the authority to exercise church power? His answer is the Christian congregation. But how does one know which group – the one in Leisnig or the

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*alius quidem status ab officio praedicandi. Itaque horales et Missales sunt sacerdotes, id est, Idola quaedam viva, nomen sacerdotii habentia, cum sint nihil minus, quales sacerdotes Hieroboam...ordinavit de infima fece plebis.”*

<sup>29</sup> WA 6:567.25-30: “Caeterum, nisi fallor, si ruat hoc sacramentum et commentum aliquando, vix subsistet ipse Papatus cum suis characteribus, redibitque ad nos laeta libertas, qua nos omnes aequales esse quocunque iure intelligemus et excusso tyrannidis iugo sciemus, quod, qui Christianus est, Christum habet, qui Christum habet, omnia quae Christi sunt habet, omnia potens.”



one in the monastery – is Christian? Answer: “The sure mark by which the Christian congregation can be recognized is that the pure gospel is preached there.” Luther’s thinking is quite straightforward. Quoting Is. 55:10-11, “My word...shall not return empty to me...my word shall accomplish everything for which I sent it,” Luther concludes that “there must be Christians wherever the gospel is, no matter how few and sinful and weak they may be” and likewise, “where the gospel is absent and human teachings rule, there no Christians live but only pagans, no matter how numerous they are and how holy and upright their life may be” (LW 39:305).<sup>30</sup>

Luther goes on then to reject the authority of the monastic community and similar religious foundations because “they insist on their human teachings, have driven the gospel far away from themselves, and are still driving it away” (306).<sup>31</sup>

Luther also has no use for human arrangements – “statutes, law, old precedent, usage, custom” – “in this matter of judging teachings and appointing or dismissing teachers or pastors,” because this concerns eternal things, like salvation, not temporal things, and in an eternal matter “it must be ruled and seized only by the eternal word....this matter must be dealt with according to Scripture and God’s word” (306).<sup>32</sup>

To that end, therefore, Luther resorts to Scripture passages that instruct, indeed, command believers to judge their pastors and teachers. Papal defenders may insist that such judging be left to “bishops, scholars, and councils”;<sup>33</sup> but passages like John 10:4,5,8 (“My sheep know my voice”; “My sheep do not follow strangers, but flee from them, for they do not know the voice of strangers”; etc.), Matt. 7:15 (“Beware of false prophets”), 1 Thess. 5:21 (“Test everything but hold fast to that which is good”), and Matt. 24:4-5 (“Take heed that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray”) – all these passages (and there are many others) “do nothing but

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<sup>30</sup> WA 11:408.8-10, 16-21: “*Da bey aber soll man die Christlich gemeyne gewisslich erkennen: wo das lautter Euangelion gepredigt wirt....Da her sind wyr sicher, das unmuglich ist, das nicht Christen seyn sollten, da das Euangelion gehet, wie wenig yhr ymer sey und wie sundlich und geprechlich sie auch seyn, gleich wie es unmuglich ist, das da Christen und nicht eyttel heyden seyn sollten, da das Euangelion nicht gehet und menschen lere regirn, wie viel yhr auch ymer sey und wie heylig und seyn sie ymer wandeln.*”

<sup>31</sup> WA 11:408.25-27: “*sie noch heuttigs tags auff yhren menschen leren stehen und das Euangelion gar von sich vertrieben haben und auch noch vertreyben.*”

<sup>32</sup> WA 11:408.29-31, 409.3-6: “*yynn solchem handel, nemlich lere tzu urteylen, lerer odder seelsorger eyn und ab zu setzen, mus man sich gar nichts keren an menschen gesetz, rech alltherkomen, brauch, gewonheyt....Darumb mus sie nur mit ewigem wort geregirt und gefasst seyn....Darumb mus man hyrynnen handeln nach der schriff und Gottis wort.*”

<sup>33</sup> WA 11:409.20: “*Bischoffen, gelerten und Concilien.*”

take the right and power to judge all doctrine away from the teachers and with a stern decree impose it on the listeners instead, on pain of losing their soul” (306-308).<sup>34</sup>

This means then that a congregation, like the one in Leisnig, *must* withdraw from the authority of those – bishops, abbots, monasteries, and the like – who “teach and rule contrary to God and his word” (308-09).<sup>35</sup> For Luther, this is not an option but a necessity.

But from this it also follows that the congregation must make provision for a gospel ministry in its midst because, as Luther says, “a Christian congregation neither should nor could exist without God’s word” (309).<sup>36</sup> Significantly, in view of Luther’s strong emphasis on the priesthood of *all* believers, Luther does *not* say that the congregation may choose just anyone for the public ministry. No, the church must restrict itself to “those who are found to be qualified and whom God has enlightened with reason and endowed with gifts to do so” (309).<sup>37</sup> So, there is a distinction in Luther’s mind between those who have the authority and those who may exercise the authority on behalf of the community. The former includes all the believers but the latter only those qualified and called by the congregation.

In this work, as well as the others consulted for the early Luther, the Reformer does not say very much about qualifications for the public ministry of the Church. But he does discuss the call into that ministry. On the one hand, Luther continues to insist that every individual Christian – not just the Christian community and certainly not just the pastor – has a duty to respond to the need of those around him to hear the gospel by sharing it with them. Luther describes it as “brotherly love” to “look at the need of the poor and perishing souls” and to preach the Word to them after the example of the two deacons, Stephen and Philip, and Apollos in the book of Acts, who had no call but did a great deal of notable preaching. In response to need, Luther says, a call is not necessary, for “it is the duty of love to help if there is no one else who could or should help” (310).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> WA 11:411.3-5: “Die thun nichts anders denn das sie das recht und macht, alle lere tzu urteylen, von den lerern nemen und mit ernstlichem gepott bey der seelen verlust den zuhoren aufflegen.”

<sup>35</sup> WA 11:411.18: “widder gott und seyn wortt leren und regiren.”

<sup>36</sup> WA 11:411.22-23: “Christlich gemeyne on gottis wortt nicht seyn soll noch kan.”

<sup>37</sup> WA 11:411.28-30: “die ienigen, so man geschickt datzu findet und die gott mit verstand erleucht und mit gaben datzu getziert hatt.”

<sup>38</sup> WA 11:412.24-29: “Denn ynn solchem fall sihet eyn Christen aus bruderlicher liebe die nott der armen verdorben seelen an und wartet nicht, ob yhm befelh odder brieffe von Fursten odder Bischoff geben werde. Denn nott bricht alle gesetz und hatt keyn gesetz. So ist die liebe schuldig, tzu helfen, wo sonst niemant ist, der hilfft odder helfen solt.”

On the other hand, when there is a congregation in place, made up of those “who have the same power and right as he [i.e., the believer]...he should let himself be called and chosen to preach and to teach in the place of and by the command of the others.”<sup>39</sup> In this connection, Luther argues that 1 Corinthians 14 with its instructions regarding letting “all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and be admonished” provides “an overwhelming power to the Christian congregation to preach, to permit preaching, and to call.” Indeed, the church must exercise these powers, as Luther exclaims, “How much more right does a whole congregation have to call someone into this office when there is a need, *as there always is*, especially now! [emphasis mine]” (310-11).<sup>40</sup> Churches have to have preachers!

Of course, in the medieval church, bishops had the responsibility for providing priests and Luther is still willing to grant bishops a role. Obviously, he has no use for bishops who are opposed to the gospel, suggesting that “they represent the devil and are wolves” and are better suited to driving asses and leading dogs.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, if there were “really decent bishops who wanted to have the gospel and wanted to institute decent preachers,” Luther would retain them. But not even they should simply dictate to the church who their pastor is supposed to be. Instead, such a bishop “should confirm the one whom the congregation chose and called.” In fact, if a bishop refuses to do so, the man chosen “is confirmed anyway by virtue of the congregation’s call” (311-12).<sup>42</sup> For Luther, the congregation’s call is absolute; the bishop’s confirmation not at all.

Luther’s biblical basis for this conclusion is interesting. For one thing, he argues that Timothy, Titus, and Paul did not appoint priests without the congregation’s election and call, because the apostle insisted in the pastoral epistles that none be named unless he is “blameless” and “tested.” But Titus and Timothy would not have known who qualified on

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<sup>39</sup> WA 11:412.30-33: “Wenn er aber ist, da Christen an dem ortt sind, die mit yhm gleyche macht und recht haben, da soll er sich selb nicht erfur thun, sondern sich beruffen und erfurtzihen lassen, das er an stad und befelh der andern predige and lere.”

<sup>40</sup> WA 11:413.10-11, 17-19: “Wie viel mehr ists denn recht, das eyn gantze gemeyne eynen berufft tzu solchem ampt, wens nott ist, wie es denn alltzeyt und sonderlich itzt ist....Dissen spruch las dir nicht eyn ungewissen grund seyn, der so uberflussig macht gibt der Christlichen gemeynen, das sie mag predigen, predigen lassen und beruffen.”

<sup>41</sup> WA 11:413.31-35: “Nu sie [unssere Bischoffe und Epte] aber an des teuffels stat sitzen und wolffe sind, die das Euangelion nicht leren noch leyden wollen....Esell sollten sie treyben und hund leyten.”

<sup>42</sup> WA 11:414.1-2, 12-15: “wenn sie nu gleych rechtschaffene Bischoffe weren, die das Euangelion haben wollten und rechtschaffene prediger setzen wollten....soll keyn Bischoff yemand eynsetzen on der gemeyn wal, will und beruffen, sondern soll den erweleten und beruffen von der gemeyne bestettigen, thut ers nicht, das der selb dennoch bestettiget sey durch den gemeyne beruffen.”

such grounds, presumably because they are standards that one meets only over a period of years. Only the Christian community from which the candidate comes is in a position to judge these requirements, and so the congregation “must name the man” (312).<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, Luther also uses as evidence the practice of the apostles regarding what Luther viewed as a “lesser office,” that of deacon, as described in Acts 4:

The apostles were not permitted to institute persons...without the knowledge and consent of the congregation...If, then, the apostles were not permitted to institute, on their own authority, an office having to do only with the distribution of temporal food, how could they have dared to impose the highest office of preaching on anyone by their own power without the knowledge, will, and call of the congregation? (312)<sup>44</sup>

Finally, in this treatise, Luther makes it clear that the “office of preaching” is the “highest office in Christendom.”<sup>45</sup> In his day, Luther asserts, the bishops assigned the task of preaching to the lowest orders, “the chaplains, monks, and mendicants” so that they could spend their own time on tasks of their own invention, confirmations and consecrating bells, altars, and churches. For Luther, this is proof-positive that such bishops are “perverted and blind masks and true child-bishops” (314).<sup>46</sup> Nothing is more important than preaching, and yet they willingly neglected it in favor of man-made trifles and ceremonies.

An emphasis on preaching is also characteristic of the fourth document, considered for the “early” Luther, and that is *Concerning the Ministry*, also from 1523, written to the church in Bohemia where the Hussite tradition was still strong. Originally addressed to the “Illustrious Senate and People of Prague,” Luther’s purpose was to convince that Christian community that they did not need to accommodate themselves to Roman

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<sup>43</sup> WA 11:414.19-21: “Nu wirt yhe Titus nicht gewist haben, wilche untadelich gewesen sind, Sondern solch gerucht mus aus der gemeyne komen, die mus eyn solchen an geben.”

<sup>44</sup> WA 11:414.23-29: “die Aposteln selbs nicht thursten personen zu Diacon eynsetzen on der gemeyn wissen un willen...So nu eyn solch ampt, das nur uber zeyttlich narung auszuteylen, die Aposteln nicht thursten von eygener uberkeyt eynsetzen, Wie sollten sie so kun gewesen seyn, das sie das hohest ampt zu predigen yemant aus eygener gewallt on der gemeyne wissen, willen und beruffen hetten auffgelegt.”

<sup>45</sup> WA 11:415.30-31: “Darumb wem das predig ampt auffgelegt wirt, dem wirt das hohist ampt auffgelegt ynn der Christenheyte.”

<sup>46</sup> WA 11:416.3-6, 9-10: “Daran man aber sihet, das unsser itzige Bischoff und geystlichen gotzen und nicht Bischoffe sind. Denn sie lassen das hohist ampt des wortts, das yhr eygen seyn sollt, den aller geringsten, nemlich Capellan und Monchen, terminarien,....Es sind verkerete, verblente larven und rechte kinder bisschoffe.”

understandings of the ministry but could call and ordain pastors for themselves. Like the other documents we have examined, this one too shows that for Luther the priesthood of believers was basic to everything that he says about the ministry.

Without going into detail about what Luther has to say about our topic in this work, since much of it repeats what we have seen in the other writings, permit me to focus on a few points in which Luther's teaching elaborates upon the previous material. Perhaps the most obvious development is Luther's much more thorough explication of the priesthood of believers that he now connects explicitly to the priesthood of Christ.

Although Luther still refers to baptism as the means whereby we are born again as God's priests, he also points to Christ as the basis for a believer's priesthood, "Christ is a priest, therefore Christians are priests....That we are his [Christ's] 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" (LW 40:19-20).<sup>47</sup> Luther employs this argument in order once again to answer Rome's claim that ordination creates an exclusive caste of priests in the Church. No, says Luther, all Christians are one with Christ (who was a priest without papal ordination), and that means they are priests in Christ simply by virtue of being Christian.

Another important development here both for Luther's understanding of the Christian priesthood and his sense of the ministry deriving from it is Luther's more thorough description of priestly functions, arranged in order of importance. For each function, Luther cites relevant Scripture to prove that God has entrusted the function to the faithful and not simply to the clergy. Here as earlier, the most important of these functions is "to teach, to preach and proclaim the Word of God"; but now Luther lists additional functions and ties them all to the Word:

The first and foremost of all on which everything else depends, is the teaching of the Word of God. For we teach with the Word, we consecrate with the Word, we bind and absolve sins by the Word, we baptize with the Word, we sacrifice with the Word, we judge all things by the Word. Therefore when we grant the Word to anyone, we cannot deny anything to him pertaining to the exercise of his priesthood. (21)<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> WA 12:179.15-19: "*Christus est sacerdos, ergo Christiani sunt sacerdotes....Quod fratres eius sumus, non nisi nativitate nova sumus. Quare et sacerdotes sumus sicut et ipse, fillii sicut et ipse, reges sicut et ipse.*"

<sup>48</sup> WA 12:180.1-2, 5-9: "*Sunt autem sacerdotalia officia ferme haec: docere, praedicare annunciareque verbum dei....Primum vero et summum omnium, in quo omnia pendent alia, est docere verbum dei. Nam verbo docemus, verbo consecramus, verbo ligamus et solvimus, verbo baptisamus, verbo sacrificamus, per verbum de omnibus iudicamus, ut*

As before but now in connection with each of these priestly functions (including intercessory prayer that he mentions later), Luther's argument is that the function belongs to the individual Christian as well as to the group. He states this explicitly in a couple of instances. When discussing the ministry of the word, Luther cites Paul (1 Corinthians 14) and remarks that the apostle speaks "to the whole church and *each individual Christian* [emphasis mine]" (22).<sup>49</sup> Regarding the power to absolve and retain sins, Luther writes, "The keys belong to the whole church and to *each of its members*, both as regards their authority and their various uses [emphasis mine]" (27).<sup>50</sup> Then, in a summary statement, Luther lists them all:

There is no other Word of God than that which is given all Christians to proclaim. There is no other baptism than the one which any Christian can bestow. There is no other remembrance of the Lord's Supper than that which any Christian can observe and which Christ has instituted. There is no other kind of sin than that which any Christian can bind or loose. There is no other sacrifice than of the body of every Christian. No one but a Christian can pray. No one but a Christian may judge doctrine. (34-35)<sup>51</sup>

Clearly, for Luther, because God entrusts the priesthood to every Christian, he also entrusts each function of the priesthood to every Christian.

But what about *using* these functions? At certain points, Luther sounds as if he expects the individual Christian routinely to exercise a priestly function, e.g., the right to judge doctrine. After citing several passages in which the faithful are admonished not to believe false teachers, Luther writes, "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?...Anyone may teach as he pleases, but what you believe is your responsibility whether it result in your peril or your benefit" (32).<sup>52</sup>

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*cuicumque verbum cesserimus, huic plane nihil negare possumus, quod ad sacerdotem pertinet."*

<sup>49</sup> WA 12:181.11-12: "*ad totam Ecclesiam et ad singulos Christianos.*"

<sup>50</sup> WA 12:184.21-22: "*Claves sunt totius Ecclesiae et cuiuslibet membri eius.*"

<sup>51</sup> WA 12:189.40-190.6: "*Nos in hoc stamus: Non esse aliud verbum dei, quam quod omnibus Christianis annunciari praecipitur. Non esse alium baptismum, quam quem quilibet Christianus [sic] conferre potest. Non esse aliam memoriam coenae dominicae, quam ubi quilibet Christianus facere potest, quod Christus facere instituit. Non esse aliud peccatum, quam quod Christianus quilibet ligare et solvere debet. Non esse aliud sacrificium, quam corpus cuiuslibet Christiani. Non posse orare nisi solum Christianum. Non debere iudicare de doctrinis nisi Christianum. Haec autem sunt sacerdotalia et regalia.*"

<sup>52</sup> WA 12:188.13-16, 17-19: "*quid aliud docemur, quam ut nostrae propriae quisque pro se salutis rationem habens, certus sit, quid credat et sequatur, ac iudex liberrimus sit omnium, qui docent eum, intus a deo solo doctus....Doceat ergo quisquis, quod docet, tibi videndum est tuo summo periculo aut commodo, quid credas.*"

Nevertheless, Luther's emphasis is on the *community's* obligation to call someone to exercise the priestly functions in their name rather than everybody's exercising these powers on his own, "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." Other than an emergency, Luther writes, "publicly one may not exercise a right without consent of the whole body or of the church" (34).<sup>53</sup> In short, the primary function of Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of believers is to justify the community's calling someone into the ministry.

It is also noteworthy that in this treatise, Luther applies his theology of the priesthood of believers to ecclesiastical terminology and argues against using the term "priest" (*sacerdos*) for those chosen by the congregation to preach and administer the sacraments. Since all Christians are priests, it is "greatly injurious to the church," Luther argues, to restrict the term to some in the Church only. Instead, it would be better to follow the New Testament and employ the terms found there, "ministers, deacons, bishops, stewards, presbyters." Such terminology, found especially in Paul, emphasizes that "it is not the estate or order, or any authority or dignity that he wants to uphold, but only the office and work [*officium et opus*]. The authority and the dignity of the priesthood resided in the community of believers" (35).<sup>54</sup>

Luther's *Concerning the Ministry* also includes a brief description of how the congregation should go about choosing someone for the ministry. Luther urges them to gather, to pray humbly (sorrowing for sin but confident in God's mercy) and then "to elect one or more whom you desire, and who appear to be worthy and able."<sup>55</sup> Once again, although Luther says little about who may be chosen, his referring his readers to Paul's requirements in Titus and 1 Timothy indicates that only some of God's priests are eligible to serve in the public ministry.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> WA 12:189.21-23, 26-27: "*Verum haec communio iuris cogit, ut unus, aut quotquot placuerint communitati, eligantur vel acceptentur, qui vice et nomine omnium, qui idem iuris habent, exequantur officia ista publice....publice exequi non licet, nisi consensu universitatis seu Ecclesiae.*"

<sup>54</sup> WA 12:190.11-16, 21-23: "*Ex his omnibus credo confirmatum esse eos, qui sacramentis et verbo inter populos praesunt, non posse nec debere sacerdotes vocari. Quod autem sacerdotes vocantur...deinde maximo Ecclesiae incommodo probatum. Caeterum iuxta Euangelicas literas Ministri, diaconi, Episcopi, dispensatores rectius nominarentur, qui et ob aetatem presbyteri sepius vocantur....ut ubique non statum, ordinem, ius seu dignitatem quandam (ut nostri volunt) erigeret [Paulus], sed officium et opus tantum comman-daret, iure et dignitate sacerdotii in communi relictis.*"

<sup>55</sup> WA 12:193.35-38: "*Tum convocatis et convenientibus libere, quorum corda deus tetigerit, ut vobiscum idem sentiant et sapiant, procedatis in nomine domini et eligite quem et quos volueritis, qui digni et idonei visi fuerint.*"

<sup>56</sup> WA 12:194.2-3: "*Nam quales eligere oporteat, docet satis Paulus Tit. 1, 1. Timothe.3.*"

Luther also includes a brief description of an evangelical ordination, “Then let those who are leaders among you lay hands upon them, and certify and commend them to the people and the church and the community” (40).<sup>57</sup> Obviously, this is no sacrament and bishops (probably clergy in general) are not necessary to this rite. Luther values the ceremony merely as a way of publicly confirming what the congregation has just done in its choice of a preacher.

In spite of the fact that the whole thrust of this treatise, *Concerning the Ministry*, is to argue that the congregation may and should call its own preachers, since the clergy exercise powers given originally to the people, nonetheless, Luther is willing to tolerate human weakness for a time and to accept something other than a congregational call as the process for a man’s entering the ministry. “If,” says Luther to the Bohemians, “you are altogether too weak to dare attempt this free and apostolic way of establishing a ministry, I suppose we must endure your weakness and permit you to go on accepting those ordained by papal bishops....Use these...to call and elect and ordain such as they think capable and you will endure” (41).<sup>58</sup> What Luther has in mind is for *evangelical* priests of the old order to take the lead in preparing and appointing a new generation of preachers. Although Luther conceived of this as a temporary measure,<sup>59</sup> it shows that for him *preaching* the Word is more important than the *process* of obtaining preachers.

If then we look at all four treatises together, what conclusions can we draw from the early Luther about ministry, ordination, and priesthood? For one thing and probably most important, preaching the Word is the centerpiece of the Church’s ministry. Reacting against an emphasis upon *status*, whereby the clergy of his day separated themselves from the laity and isolated themselves from criticism and correction, Luther maintained that from a biblical perspective, one should emphasize *function*, whereby the clergy serve God’s people with His gracious promises in Christ. Without such service, i.e., preaching the gospel, there can be no faith, for faith is always and only a response to the good news.

Therefore, churches must have preachers; but in Luther’s day, the institutional church – the pope, bishops, etc. – refused to provide them, preferring instead to ordain priests who corrupted the gospel, preemi

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<sup>57</sup> WA 12:193.38-194.1: “*tum impositis super eos manibus illorum, qui potiores inter vos fuerint, confirmetis et commendetis eos populo et Ecclesiae seu universitati.*”

<sup>58</sup> WA 12:194.21-25: “*Quod si omnino infirmiores estis, quam ut hunc liberum et Apostolicum ritum instituendi sacerdotii audeatis tentare, age feremus infirmitatem vestram et permittamus, ut iam ordinatos ab Episcopis papisticis accipiatis...et utamini illis vice Episcoporum papalium, ut illi vocent et eligant atque confirment quos viderint idoneos et vobis tolerabiles esse.*”

<sup>59</sup> WA 12:194.29-30: “*donec adolescatis et plene intelligatis, quae sit potentia verbi dei.*”



nently by sacrificing the mass. So Luther searched the Scriptures to find out what could be done about it. It was on this basis and in this context that Luther developed his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers – a doctrine that dismantled the distinction in status between clergy and lay and that empowered every Christian to preach the good news as need and opportunity required.

But also important in Luther's thinking was the Christian community, for when such a community was in place, it was the community as a whole and not the individual that had primary responsibility for exercising priestly powers. To carry out this responsibility, the community should call one or more of their own, who meet the biblical requirements, to preach the Word publicly to and for them.

As far as ordination was concerned, Luther rejected all medieval notions of its sacramental character as without biblical merit and devised merely to elevate the clergy over the laity. As was typical of the great Reformer, however, he did not simply abolish ordination but retained and reoriented it as a confirming rite of what the congregation had done in calling a pastor to preach the Word.

In short, through 1523, Luther's view of ordination is ceremonial and his view of the ministry is functional. Through faith and baptism, every Christian receives authority to preach and administer the sacraments; but to exercise this authority in other than emergency situations, the Christian community calls preachers to do this work for them. It is the work of the Word that is essential, for through the Word of the gospel, God saves sinners.