

## ONE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

**Two Priesthoods or One?** Does *Called To Common Mission* (CCM) require two priesthoods or one? The text slips and slides. It affirms “the ministry of the whole people of God” and “the ministry of the baptized”(CCM ¶6). But these terms and phrases are not equivalent to Luther’s one priesthood of all believers. CCM also affirms “ordained ministers ... do not cease to **share in the priesthood of all believers**” (¶7). But do ordained ministers also **constitute** a separate priesthood with special power that laity lack? That’s the question.

CCM claims that “the priesthood of all believers **affirms the need** for ordained ministry”(¶7) To the contrary, the Augsburg Confession, Article 5, affirms that “God ... provided the Gospel and sacraments.” Through these concrete means, God the Holy Spirit works faith “where and when God pleases.” Jesus Christ gives himself in these “means of grace,” the Word and sacraments. Therefore the one priesthood of all believers does **not affirm the need** for additional priests specially endowed to channel grace, to make Christ present. In fact to **require** something more, in this case a special priesthood, is to compromise the sole sufficiency of Christ’s death for sin and thus his Lordship as the sole Mediator.

Because CCM **requires** a second, special priesthood for ordination and communion, it rejects Luther’s claim that there is only one priesthood of all believers.

**The Total Luther.** In 1520 Luther said, “We are all ordained priests through baptism.”<sup>1</sup> In his early years, in his battle against Rome, Luther wrote eloquently about the one priesthood of all believers. But the expression is seldom mentioned in his later writings. Does that mean that as he battled other forces, particularly the spiritual enthusiasts, he gave up the one priesthood of all believers and returned to a Roman Catholic view that sacramental priests are necessary? No. The motif of the one priesthood of all believers is not limited to the young Luther but remained a central concern throughout his career:

1520 “To put it still more clearly: suppose a group of earnest Christian laymen were taken prisoner and set down in a desert without an episcopally ordained priest among them. And suppose they were to come to a common mind there and then in the desert and elect one of their number, whether he were married or not, and charge him to baptize, say mass, pronounce absolutions, and preach the gospel. Such a man would be as truly a priest as though he had been ordained by all the bishops and popes in the world” (LW 44:128, *To the Christian Nobility*).<sup>2</sup>

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Every  
Baptized  
Christian  
Is A  
Priest  
Already.

1535 “Consequently, every baptized Christian is a priest already, not  
to by appointment or ordination from the pope or any other  
1539 man, but because Christ himself has begotten him as a priest  
and has given birth to him in Baptism. It is important to  
know this because of the papal abomination. The pope has  
usurped the term ‘priest’ for his anointed and tonsured  
hordes. By this means they have separated themselves from  
the ordinary Christians and have called themselves uniquely  
the ‘clergy of God,’ God’s heritage and chosen people, who  
must help other Christians by their sacrifice and worship.

The preaching office is no more than a public service which happens to be conferred upon someone by the whole congregation, all the members of which are priests ... After we have become Christians ... each one, according to his calling and position, obtains the right and the power of teaching and confessing before others this Word.... Even though not everybody has the public office and calling....”(LW 13:329, 332-33, *Exposition of Psalm 110*).

1541 “In the church a bishop is not made by the succession of  
to bishops, instead the Lord alone is our bishop” (*Weimar*  
1545 *Edition of Luther’s Works, 53:74*).

The whole church is a priesthood; each baptized priest is called to be a speaker of the Word, trusting that the Holy Spirit works through the Word, creating faith and sanctifying believers. In fact, Luther claimed that mothers and fathers are our first bishops:

Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the Gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal. Whoever teaches the Gospel to another is truly his apostle and bishop. Miter and staff and great estates indeed produce idols, but teaching the Gospel produces apostles and bishops.

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How Do  
Clergy Differ  
From Laity?

Christ Is Not  
Dependent  
On A  
Special  
Priesthood.

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**For the Sake of Good Order.** If, for Lutherans, all believers share equally in the one spiritual estate, how do clergy differ from laity? Only in education and vocation. For the sake of good order Lutherans train, call, and ordain “ministers of the Word.” The logic is as simple and pragmatic as Paul’s question in Romans 10: “How are they to hear without a preacher?” Many believers can preach a sermon or two. But to preach week after week, to be trained in the art of discerning law and gospel in God’s Word, takes knowledge and skill. Ordained ministers are charged with this task of public proclamation of the gospel and administration of the sacraments.

What the Reformers rejected was the idea that what Christ did on the cross needs to be completed or made present today by the sacramental action of priests who are specially endowed to make communion happen. Christ is not dependent on a special priesthood; he is living now, creating faith wherever his Word is purely preached and his sacraments administered according to this Word.

**What If A Pastor Is Not Available?** What can a Lutheran congregation do if no pastor is available? Rural congregations often face this dilemma. For the sake of good order ordained Lutherans *usually* preach and administer the sacraments, but all members of the one priesthood of all believers *may* serve in these ways where authorized. The 1993 ELCA Churchwide Assembly affirmed the practice, common in both the LCA and ALC, of allowing lay persons to preside at the sacraments where authorized.<sup>3</sup>

Like the frog who is cooked by being slowly boiled, the freedom to allow laity to preside at communion will be gradually lost under CCM. To be sure, the ELCA bishops claim that Lutherans will continue this practice. They even passed a resolution in March 1999 claiming this freedom. But the bishops’ resolution was never adopted by the 1999 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, according to ELCA Secretary Lowell Almen.<sup>4</sup> If the Assembly did not adopt it, the resolution has no binding force.

Most importantly, CCM ¶16 does not allow lay people to preside at communion when the goal of full communion is fully achieved. The Episcopal House of Bishops clarifies the terms of CCM: “The Episcopal Church follows the consensus of catholic Christianity in not allowing or recognizing this practice, **nor is it accepted or even mentioned in the text of the CCM (cf. para. 16).**” The Episcopal General Convention in July 2000 adopted this resolution as their official guide to the necessary future outcomes of CCM, when ministries become “fully interchangeable” (¶14).

Sometimes  
We Don't  
Know What  
We've Lost  
Until It's  
Gone.

**Compromising the Gospel.** Lutherans cannot give up the priesthood of all believers without compromising the gospel. Here is what's at stake:

- ✚ The **certainty** that salvation is based solely on the promises of God, not on any human righteousness including any human work such as the sacramental priesthood.
- ✚ The **assurance** that Christ is truly present in his Supper by the power of his Word alone and that the pedigree of the one who presides does not affect the reality of the sacrament.
- ✚ The **freedom** of lay Lutherans to gather around the Word and sacraments when no ordained Lutherans are available - such as in rural areas, in times of war and natural disasters, and in other extraordinary situations.
- ✚ The **flexibility** to change and alter church structures for the sake of mission.
- ✚ The **collegiality** among pastors and laity where all are equally members of the one priesthood of believers with their own vocations or callings. As Luther frequently said mothers, janitors, lawyers, and politicians are all spiritually equal to clergy in their vocations.

**Back to the Future.** Where's the ELCA heading? Back to a pre-Reformation past. As J. Robert Wright, a principle Episcopal author of CCM has said of ELCA leaders: "I think they see us as possibly helping them recover the ancient catholic tradition which they had prior to the Reformation."<sup>5</sup> This ancient tradition is one in which a wall was erected between clergy and laity because clergy claimed to have special grace and power which laity lacked. Luther tore down that wall, but under CCM it will be gradually rebuilt until the ELCA Lutherans recover "the ancient catholic tradition which they had prior to the Reformation."

<sup>1</sup> LW 44:127, *To the Christian Nobility*, 1520.

<sup>2</sup> LW 45:46, *The Estate of Marriage*, 1522. See also LW 40: 3-44, especially 23-25.

<sup>3</sup> Adopted: "To reaffirm the universal priesthood of all believers, namely, that all baptized Christians are called to minister in the name of Christ and, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the promise of God in the world ... and in unusual circumstances and where authorized, to administer the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion" (*1993 Reports and Records*, Vol. 1, Section II.1, pp. 685-86.)

<sup>4</sup> "The Tucson Resolution was not voted on by the Churchwide Assembly and thus the national secretary of the ELCA has clarified that it is not part of the amendment to paragraph 3 of CCM and that the EC is not being asked to vote on it."

([www.ecusa.anglican.org/ecumenismccmoutline.html](http://www.ecusa.anglican.org/ecumenismccmoutline.html), "Questions Answered," p.20)

<sup>5</sup> *The Living Church*, Feb. 23, 2001, p.12.

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