

Wengert: Wrong on the priesthood of all believers

Is Luther's one priesthood of all believers much ado about nothing?

In the recent *Lutheran Quarterly* Gordon Jensen¹ quotes approvingly Tim Wengert on the priesthood of all believers.² Jensen seems unaware that in 2009 Wengert's thesis about the priesthood of all believers was shown to be based on faulty scholarship. (It's as if Wengert was so determined to prove his case that he suppressed his critical faculties.)

In a critical review of Wengert's book, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops: Public Ministry for the Reformation & Today*, Dorothea Wendebourg succinctly [summarizes](#) his thesis: "Closer analysis shows what the author [Wengert] really wants to say: Luther's passages on the priesthood of all believers mean much less than what is commonly thought."³

Wendebourg drives to the heart of Luther's explosive insight:

Luther's statements about the priesthood of all believers hardly would have made an uproar with friends and adversaries alike (just think of the flood of *Flugschriften* [pamphlets] about this topic!) if their essence had been such an undisputed banality. Furthermore, their force does not rest on the implication that there is no higher spiritual position before God than that of being baptized – this concern is central, instead, to Luther's discussion of monasticism. Where he writes about all of us being priests, the stress is on what follows from our common baptism for our spiritual *potestas* (power): "**that we all have the same potestas in the Word and in whichever sacrament**" (WA 6:566.27f). It is this statement which everyone – and rightly so – associates with Luther's discovery that all Christians are priests. For it means baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, and the like are **acts "any Christian" can perform** (WA 12:189.41ff). Luther really says "any Christian" and when shortly before he writes "all Christians in common," this is meant in the same sense – not in the sense of something which is "given to 'all Christians communally,'" as Wengert translates, thereby shifting the sense (21). Only because **Luther is serious about every Christian having this same potestas** does his argument make sense, that order forbids every Christian to make use of it in public on his own initiative.⁴

Luther's one priesthood of all believers has, for five hundred years, informed Lutheran freedom for mission. Two examples: In times of war and dislocation when there are no regularly ordained pastors,

¹ Gordon A. Jensen, "The Sacrament of Baptism," *Lutheran Quarterly* XXIX:3 (Autumn 2015) 270, 280 fn 66, 67.

² Timothy J. Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops. Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 8.

³ Dorothea Wendebourg, review of Timothy J. Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops. Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today* in *Lutheran Quarterly* XXIII/3 (Autumn 2009) 348-351, here 349.

⁴ Wendebourg review, 349; emphasis added.

WA 6:566.27f; LW 36:116: "Let everyone, therefore, 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." (*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520)

WA 12:189.41ff; LW 40:35: "Here we take our stand: 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." (*Concerning the Ministry*, 1523)

congregations have been free to designate a lay person to preside at the Lord's Supper.⁵ In places where no regularly ordained pastors are available, such as rural congregations, lay Lutherans are designated to preside at the Lord's Supper.

Wengert's faulty case supports CCM's sacramental episcopate. Wengert's claim that the priesthood of all believers means less than is commonly thought gives false support to *Called to Common Mission* (CCM), the Lutheran-Episcopal full communion agreement begun in 1999. CCM requires the ELCA to adopt gradually a sacramental priesthood of deacon, priest, and bishop as in the Episcopal Church.⁶

In the Episcopal tradition believers do **not** all have "the same power in relation to the Word and sacraments." To the contrary, only bishops can ordain; only bishops and priests can confect the Eucharist. Prior to being ordained a priest, one **must be** ordained a deacon.

Under CCM the Episcopal Church agreed to lift its ordinals temporarily, "**precisely** in order to secure the **future implementation** of the ordinals' same principle in the sharing of ordained ministries" (CCM ¶16; emphasis added).

That future is almost here.

In 2012 The Episcopal Church identified [lay presidency and the lack of ordained deacons](#) as remaining defects the ELCA must correct.

In response the ELCA has [announced these defects will be fixed by 2019](#).

The 2019 Churchwide Assembly will vote to approve "consecrated" (ordained) deacons. Left unsaid but implied is the prohibition of lay leaders ever presiding at the Lord's Supper.⁷

In 2017 Lutherans worldwide will celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. ELCA leaders will join in the celebration. They will even praise Luther's priesthood of all believers – but only in the diminished sense that Wengert means it: We're all Christians. We're all ministers, servants. Much ado about nothing.

⁵ In the Asian Soviet Republics and [in Siberia](#) in the twentieth century, hundreds of Lutheran congregations existed without "regularly" ordained clergy.

⁶ CCM is riddled with technical language and doubletalk. One example: The ordination of deacons is not required (¶9), but the Episcopal ordinals are only lifted temporarily "precisely in order to secure the **future** implementation of the ordinals' same principle in the sharing of ordained ministries" (CCM ¶16, emphasis added).

⁷ To be sure, rural ELCA congregations without ordained pastors will not be denied communion. Probably someone from the congregation will be "ordained to place" in order to preside at communion (as is practiced in the Episcopal Church today). However, that person will have to have the bishops' hands on his/her head. An actual ordination will be performed.