
A Priesthood of Believers— Neither Republic Nor Hierarchy

by Glen Greenwalt

There is at present a power struggle in the Seventh-day Adventist church. Growing numbers of the laity and clergy insist that the polity of the church must become more representative of its membership.¹ On the other hand, large numbers of the laity and clergy (especially those in administrative positions) fear that a decentralization of church polity will lead inevitably to a loss of the unity and uniqueness of the Adventist mission. As in the case of most contests, each side has championed its own slogans, the most prominent one of those calling for a restructuring of church polity based on the Protestant doctrine of “the priesthood of all believers.”

Unfortunately, this doctrine is seldom explained, or worse still, anachronistically identified with American republicanism.² This is not surprising. Protestants have rarely clarified how the doctrine of the universal priesthood translates into governmental polity. Traditionally they have been far more adept at attacking perceived and real problems of organizational abuse, than in establishing a form of polity which fosters renewal of the spirit.

This paper attempts to cut through the rhetoric of some 400 years of Protestant polemics and practice. We will show that Luther’s understanding of what it means to be a church in which all are priests is far more insightful than our own.

Luther, in his recovery of this important biblical doctrine, stated it in a way that guards against the abuses of clericalism and congregationalism. In addition, he established it on a plane high above the slogans of political contests. The purpose of

this article, therefore, is to provide a theology of church that should precede any determination of church polity.

If you were to ask Luther why he believed every baptized member of the Christian faith is a priest, when there was no precedent for such an inclusive priesthood anywhere in the ancient world, not even in the religion of Israel or in the tradition of the church, he would be ready with one of two answers. First, Luther was convinced by the simple syllogism that “since [Christ] is a priest and we are his brethren all Christians have the power and must fulfill the command to preach and to come before God with our intercession for one another and to sacrifice ourselves to God.” In other words, since Christians are members of the body of Christ, the gifts of Christ are shared by all.³

Second, Luther held that, just as there is no other proclamation of God’s Word than that which is common to all, so there can be no priesthood other than that which is open to all.⁴ The peasant, the cobbler, the artisan, the noble—all are equal before God’s Word. Because of their belief, signified in baptism, all can and must serve as priests. Luther was wholly unimpressed by the counter argument of the Roman magisterium that only a special priesthood can rightly serve God and the church since all other members of the church lack the special character conveyed by the sacrament of ordination. In a keen retort, Luther answers, “God’s Word is holy and sanctifies everything it touches.”⁵

On this basis, then, Luther denounced the spiritual caste system on which the church of his day was founded. As Luther often stated with piercing clarity,

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“If [the magisterium] were forced to grant that all of us that have been baptised are equally priests, as indeed we are. . . they would then know they have no right to rule over us except insofar as we freely concede it. For thus it is written in I Peter 2: ‘You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood and a priestly royalty.’” Therefore we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians.⁶

But if we are all priests with the right to approach God on our own, what place can the church have? Does not the concept of the universal priesthood of believers produce a self-sufficient

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Protestantism in which the church and our fellow believers must take a back seat to our personal dealings with God? Luther answers that the church is important precisely because it is a community composed exclusively of priests.⁷

The individualistic interpretation of the believers’ priesthood according to which each person is his or her own priest, is far from Luther’s way of thinking. To be sure, a priest has the privilege of free access to God, but this does not warrant individual dealings with God at the expense of our relationships with our fellow believers.

By definition a priest is someone who performs religious duties for others. The priesthood of all believers is not a license for individual posturing before God. Rather it does just the opposite—it promotes community. To be a priest, after all, is to minister to others. The church is of immense importance, therefore, because it is the community where Christian priests minister to the needs of one another.

Nowhere is Luther’s concern to promote a community marked by mutual sharing and care better demonstrated than in his understanding of the church as the *communio sanctorum*, which may be translated as a “holy people,” or a “holy community.”⁸ The definition of the church as *communio sanctorum* was not original with Luther, of course, but one he inherited. However,

Luther radically revamped its meaning. According to the theology of the day, *communio sanctorum* referred not only to the saints residing in heaven, but to a participation with the saints as holy people, i.e., in their merits. As a consequence, the biblical meaning of *saint* as a member of the church on earth was pushed into the background and the sharing with the saints was turned into a materialized commerce between heaven and earth. Luther sought to change this.

First, he brought the community of saints down from heaven to earth. “Whatever it is that you want to do for the saint,” Luther admonished, “turn your attention away from the dead towards the living. The living saints are your neighbors: the naked, the hungry, the thirsty, the poor people who have wives and children and suffer shame.”⁹

Second, he ruthlessly attacked the commerce in merits between the heavenly and the earthly church and the moralism it spawned. For Luther the whole notion of there being a treasury of the excess merits of the departed saints was based on a faulty premise. It suggests God can be persuaded by substitutionary achievement or meritorious intercession.. What one can do is go to the side of another and work for him and pray that he might receive his own faith and works. In this way the merits of the saints (fellow believers) do serve as a treasury in the church, not because they are excess merits, but because the church is a community of saints in which each one works for the other, as members of one another.¹⁰ In short, the way of merit is replaced with priestly service one to another.

Clearly, then, while the Reformation Luther began took place in conflict with the church of his day, his protest was not waged in the name of a churchless and individual piety, but in the name of true Christian catholicity.¹¹ Luther would be shocked to learn that his writings have been used to defend the spirit of independence and self-reliance that has often characterized Protestantism. Far from being an advocate of go-it-alone Protestantism, Luther’s entire ecclesial agenda promoted the kind of community that would provide the widest and deepest basis for pastoral care. For Luther, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers meant that existence

for oneself is replaced by a life of service for others. As Christ has become the common possession of us all, so we are to become the common possession of one another; as he emptied himself and took the form of a servant, so must we.¹²

This identity between the priesthood of Christ with that of his followers is the axiom upon which Luther founded his understanding of the church as a community of holy people. As a consequence, Luther assigns duties and responsibilities to every member of the *communio sanctorum*. To begin, Luther insists that since we are priests by the power of God's Word, we all have the right and duty (on pain of losing our souls and courting the disfavor of God) to preach God's Word.¹³

A criticism that is sometimes raised, however, is that Luther reduces the priesthood to the preaching of the gospel. This is a criticism that has been around since at least the time of Trent, and is unjustified. While Luther does on occasion say the priesthood is nothing but a ministry of the Word,¹⁴ he does not mean that it is identical with the interminable sermon through which those listening in the pew are often made to suffer. The Word, for Luther, is a service, an act of caring, identical with Christ's ministry on our behalf.¹⁵ The ministry of the Word, therefore, opens before Luther the horizon of all that the church and its priesthood may ever become, for the Word not only prompts but also assures the care and nurture found in the church.

Second, while Luther emphatically rejected the medieval church's teaching regarding the treasury of merits, he untiringly taught that every Christian has the privilege and responsibility to be the agency through which others can find assurance of God's forgiveness.¹⁶ As Christians we have all been crowned, ordained, and anointed with the Holy Spirit so that we are all priests in Christ. This means, Luther wrote, "that I may go to my good friend and say to him, 'Dear friend, this is the trouble and the difficulty which I am having with sin,' and he should be free to say to me, 'Your sins are forgiven, go in the peace of God.'" ¹⁷

The prevailing notion among Protestants that Roman Catholics may need a priest to mediate between themselves and Almighty God, but Prot-

estants, as their own priests, are to face God in solitary loneliness would have been utterly foreign to Luther. For Luther, the church's greatest good and glory is that it provides a "Gracious exchange of our sin and suffering with the righteousness of Christ and the saints."¹⁸

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McCarthy states, a priest is a person who is qualified to offer sacrifices. Therefore, where there is no sacrifice there can be no priesthood.¹⁹ Luther would agree. Despite his determined attack on the mass, Luther was anxious to preserve the place of sacrifice in the church. Luther condemned the external ritualistic sacrifice of the mass, which gave rise to the commercial selling of masses. This furthered the idea that God was angry and must be appeased.

Luther called instead for a sacrifice of one's own self—a sacrifice that properly belongs not to the tonsured priests, but to all who live under the cross.²⁰ Christ's sacrifice becomes, therefore, the paradigm of all Christian sacrifice. As the Eucharist signifies, we have become one loaf with Christ. Just as Christ willingly sacrificed himself for the church, we as fellow priests with Christ are to willingly give ourselves in service to others.

Nothing so provoked Luther's ire as those who were willing to take of God's blessings, but who were unwilling to pour them out again in love. "What a terrible blasphemy against God," Luther writes, "that we all take the sacramental meal and want to be good Christians, but not one of us is willing to stoop down to serve our neighbors."²¹

Unfortunately, this side of Luther's teaching regarding the priesthood of all believers has been all but obscured in Protestantism. If the church is ever to gain a place of importance in the lives of most men and women, it seems safe to suggest that this will only happen when it becomes a commu-

nity in which priestly care toward one another is exemplified in all the magnitude and richness Luther envisioned. Seen from this perspective, questions regarding the governmental polity of the church clearly become secondary issues.

Still, the question naturally arises: If the church is a community through which the benefits of Christ course to all its members, what role is left for an ordained clergy? Luther's writings occasionally hint that the church could exist without an official, public ministry, but Luther never builds on this.²² Rather, he offers what appears to be two conflicting arguments on the necessity of ordained clergy in the church.

According to the first line of argument, a special ministry is necessary in the church because of the need for order. By right of being priest, all are authorized and called to minister, but not all should, lest chaos disrupt the church. If everyone were to exercise his or her right to preach at the same time, the din would be like a chorus of frogs or (with apologies for Luther's sexism) the clatter of housewives on the way to market where no one wishes to listen, but all want to talk. Similarly, if all insisted on performing the baptism, the poor infant would drown.²³

To avoid such bedlam, individual priests must commit the public ministry of the church to persons who will administer it for them. Preaching and the sacraments belong to the entire congregation, but the minister is the one who carries out these tasks on behalf of the congregation. It is because all are priests, then, that not all may exercise their priestly rights in public.

This position is sometimes called the *delegation theory of ministry*.²⁴ Here the office of minister is conceived to be instituted in the church as an expedient measure to assure continuity and order in the church. Hence, it belongs to the *bene esse* (well liking) of the church and not to its *esse* (essence). Not surprisingly, this view appears most often in Luther's early writings where he uses it as a polemic against the abuses of the Roman hierarchy.²⁵

The most valuable asset of such a representational model of ministry is that it promotes a collegiality in which the minister becomes a facili-

tator of the shared ministry of all. The risk of this position, on the other hand, is that the pastor may be reduced to a mere functionary of the congregation, since a pastor cannot truly represent a congregation or be its mouthpiece if he or she is forced by conscience to take a stand contrary to the convictions of the congregation.

According to the second line of argument, Luther speaks of the ordained ministry as a divine institution, distinct from the common priesthood. Here the office of pastor or bishop is "commanded, instituted, and ordered" by God and does not properly belong to the members of the church but to Christ alone.²⁶ The ministry is a gift in line with the appointment of apostles, prophets, evangelists, who have been given to the church. The real incumbent of the office of ministry according to this view, is Christ himself. The one who holds the office in the congregation speaks and acts as Christ's representative.²⁷

This view is often called the *institutional theory of ministry*.²⁸ In this case, the office of minister belongs to the very essence of the church. Not surprisingly, this position is evoked most often in Luther's writings when the common life of the church is not functioning smoothly—for example, when the church was faced with a growing band of eager, self-made preachers who were overrunning Saxony.²⁹

The advantage of this position is that the authority of the ordained ministry is safeguarded from the pressures of popular opinion and current whim. The minister is distanced from the congregation in such a way that the prophetic voice of the office of ministry is retained. The minister is accountable first to Christ and only secondarily to the congregation. The danger, of course, is that this position threatens to reduce the importance of the congregation to that of a passive observer.

Modern scholarship has found it very difficult to reconcile these two threads of thought in Luther's writings. Scholars have attempted to resolve this tension by pointing out the pastoral character of Luther's writings. Thus, it is noted, when clericalism reared its ugly head, Luther emphasized the privilege and duty belonging to all Christians. On the other hand, when the church was not being the church, Luther found it neces-

sary to emphasize the divine institution of the ministry and the prophetic word of guidance and judgment.³⁰

There is a pragmatic attractiveness to this solution. *It reminds us that neither the ordained ministry nor the congregation is ever so secure that either one or the other might not fall.* The church is a historical institution, and like all other infinite things, it is not exempt from the conflicts and tragedies that have governed all of human history. Thus, the church is forced to face, again and again the opposing threats of institutionalism and congregational enthusiasm.

The difficulty, however, with the foregoing position is that unless there is an underlying principle that allows Luther to change his emphasis to meet the exigencies of differing situations, his teaching becomes arbitrary and therefore of little value. Amazingly, Luther was unaware of the alleged contradiction in his position. Without hesitation he coordinated the delegation and institutional views of the office of ministry, at times employing both in the same passage.³¹

What allows Luther to make this move is his insistence that Christ is the only head of the church. By so doing, Luther reminds us that we are one body and that Christ's rule of the church extends to all of its members—clergy as well as laity. The clergy are, to be sure, the instruments by which Christ superintends the church. But here the clergy are granted no special honors, for the priesthood composed of all believers is also an extension of Christ's ministry in the world, and therefore divinely instituted.

Perhaps the best way to reconcile the two sides of Luther's thought is to recognize that the ministry was instituted by God but transmitted through the church. In any case, *Luther's model for governmental polity in the church is not the rule of the oligarchical few, nor the rule of the democratic many, but the rule of the Eternal Son who is active in the life of the whole church.*³²

In brief, three conclusions might be drawn from this study of Luther's understanding of the priesthood of all believers which might assist the church today in its quest to find an equitable and Christian form of polity. First, this study has shown that the doctrine of the

priesthood of all believers is concerned only accidentally with promoting a democratic form of church polity. It is essentially concerned with the self-sacrificing ministry of Christ as it is emulated in the shared life of the church. What is disappointing about the current debate in the Seventh-day Adventist church over governmental polity is its rampant distrust and accusation. On the one hand, the leadership fears that it will become "simply a figurehead coordinator surrounded by part-time lay members who control everything."³³ Many laity, on the other hand, find in the accumulated failings of leadership in recent years a con-

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firmation of their fears that without meaningful checks and balances, the "office holders in the organization will arrogate to themselves as much power as possible, all in the name of furthering the mission of the church."³⁴

What stands out in this atmosphere of suspicion and accusation is the lack of the spirit of community that Luther believed the church should demonstrate. But worse still, by focusing on the question of control, the solutions promoted by each side to overcome the current divisive spirit in the church seem to exacerbate rather than resolve the problem. As the situation now stands, the administrators view their ecclesial authority as the guarantee of the church's unity. They remain ironically unmindful of the fact that it is precisely their white-knuckled grasp on the tiller that has provoked many laity to lose confidence in the fate of the church and led to their abandoning the ship. On the other hand, the simple inclusion of a greater number of laity at the helm of the church is surely no guarantee that the church will better weather this present crisis. What is overlooked in this proposal is the great disarray among the laity as to the direction the church should take.

Which laity, then, are to be selected, and how?

Thus, the thesis of this article that a theology of church should precede any determination of church polity is not as impractical as it might first seem. Rather than being an unnecessary or time-consuming delay to needed reform, the construction of a theology of the church is necessary if there is any hope of restructuring the organization. After all, what brings order and coherence to anything, whether it be the writing of an essay, the planning of a family outing, or the running of a church, is that the procedures involved are directed toward the fulfillment of some recognized goal or objective other than the procedure itself. Thus, only when we share a common understanding of the church will we be able to form structures best adapted to fulfill the church's ends.

Second, if the church is a community or body of which Christ is the head, then absolute authority can never reside in any finite structure, since the divine by definition transcends any human understanding or structure. Unfortunately, neither the leadership nor the laity involved in the current debate seem to clearly understand this. The church's leadership quite happily asserts that the General Conference in session is the highest authority on earth. Meanwhile, they fail to seriously consider whether the General Conference has a representative composition. Possibly the reason a constitution composed primarily by white, American males favors the same has as much to do with historical contingencies as divine providence. On the other hand, many laity promote a republican form of church polity as if it were handed down by God, without seriously considering its potential liabilities. While checks and balances help counter the extravagances of human foibles, they are hardly a guarantee of truth or infallibility

The danger of course in linking God to a particular form of polity is that human conventions and structures of government are understood as expressing the very will of God. Thus not only are our statements in danger of becoming idolatrous, but any real possibility of reform is threatened, since the divine will become little more than a means for legitimizing whatever is deemed right by human convention. Thus a

vicious circle is established in which party-politics and God become one. Ironically, God is only able to transform the church when his independence from the church is jealously maintained. But more importantly, God's transcendence over human structure serves as the ideal the church has not yet attained. Thus the need for reform of the church can never end. To place barriers in the way of reform is to fail to acknowledge God's transcendence, for it is at least an implicit claim that the church is already an embodiment of the fullness of Christ's incarnation.

Third, since the church as depicted by Luther is a community characterized by priestly care for one another and not lordship, authority, while necessary, must never be confused with power or coercion—whether imposed by clergy or laity. Clearly, for a group or society to survive over time and fulfill its aims, it requires some sort of institutional authority. Plans have to be drawn up, decisions made, boundaries of the community established. One cannot imagine a community—whether a stamp club or an international corporation—that is devoid of all trappings of structure and polity.

But what distinguishes authority from power is that authority takes its rationale for existence from the intrinsic demands of the community it serves, and not from its ability to coerce others to fulfill its own ends. Thus authority can never become an end in itself; its only purpose must be to serve and enhance the life of the community.

Authority, then, is the means through which the common aims and ends of the community are achieved. To the extent that any designated authority fulfills these aims, it justifies its existence. To the extent that it fails to promote the well-being of the community it forfeits its right to rule. Thus while the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers cannot be identified with any single form of church polity, it clearly demonstrates that the establishment of any governing structure must be justified in terms of the common life of the church.

We can understand, then, why the redemptive power of the gospel as it is mirrored and proclaimed in the life of the church is the final norm of authority, for Luther, rather than institutional structures or even Scripture in and of itself. There

is a problem with making institutional authority the final norm of the church. Final authority cannot be extended to either the office of ministry or the universal priesthood, since both have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity for deafness, not to mention outright rebellion.

Nor can Scripture as a written document be the final norm of faith and practice, since it is precisely the interpretation of Scripture that is often at the heart of disagreements in the church. Only in the liberating praxis of grace, pardon, and unrestricted love do we find a norm without norms. It is only by embodying these attributes that any doctrine or polity can be authoritative in the church. Doctrines and polities that restrict the redemptive life of Christ from finding full expression in the church must be changed.

Seen from this perspective, the need for reformation in the Seventh-day Adventist church is obvious. Clearly, we have not yet achieved a community in which all barriers have been razed (Eph. 2:14), and all distinctions between persons have been reconciled in the perfect unity of Christ (Gal. 3:28).

The question is How do we get from where we now are to what the gospel would have us become? Luther, unfortunately, failed to model in his own experience a pattern we might follow. Despite his insistence upon the corporate constitution of the church, Luther tended to understand the gifts entrusted to the church in individual terms. Thus Luther understood his own vocation to be that of a theological professor and a preacher, and so studied to mind his own business. He left to others like Bugenhagen and Amsdorf the task of administering the church. To be faithful to Luther's recovery of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers

we must go beyond him to find a more immediate way in which the gifts bestowed to the church can benefit the whole body of Christ.

I confess I do not know how this might be done. However, if we would commit ourselves to a united investigation of the question of the meaning of the church, the Spirit will lead us into greater understanding and experience. The power of the Spirit is located in its ability to unite the gifts of us all. Individually, we see only facets of the problems and therefore never a complete or adequate solution. United, our vision becomes comprehensive and the solutions more available.

I propose that the Association of Adventist Forums sponsor a task force composed of laity, clergy, teachers of religion and theology, and administrators commissioned *not* to answer the question of what the church is, but to prepare a study guide for use by members in discovering the nature of the church's identity and mission. Ideally, the administrators of the various union conferences and the religion faculties of the denomination's colleges, would sponsor seminars to facilitate a united inquiry into the nature of the church and its ministry.

I cannot overemphasize that what I am proposing is *not* that the church call conferences in which prepared papers are read and then published in proceedings, but for conferences in which laity, clergy, teachers, and administrators come together to consider the meaning of our lives together in the church. Such conferences are imperative, not because of problems now confronting the church, but because *our life together* demands that we study, share, pray, and witness together. In the spirit of Luther, therefore, I present this challenge to the readership of *Spectrum* and the church.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. WA 17 III, 395, quoted by Mark Noll, "Believer-Priests in the Church: Luther's View," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 18 (Oct., 1973), p. 6.

4. LW 40, 20; Cf. LW 41, 150.

5. LW 40, 149.

6. *LW* 36, 112, 113.
7. Cf. Mark Noll, p. 6.
8. For a detailed discussion of Luther's understanding of the church as a community of saints see, Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. by Robert Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 294-318.
9. *WA* 10 III, 407 f.; Cf. Althaus, p. 307.
10. *LW* 31, 215 f.
11. Cf. Althaus, p. 287.
12. *LW* 31, 354 f.
13. *LW* 35, 112-114.
14. *LW*, 113.
15. *LW*, 112-114.
16. Cf. *LW* 40, 19 f.; also *LW* 36, 113.
17. *WA* 10 III, 395; Cf. Althaus, p. 317.
18. *LW* 35, 60.
19. Timothy McMarthy O. P., *The Postconciliar Christian: The Meaning of the Priesthood of the Laity* (New York: P. J. Kennedy and Sons, 1967), p. 8.
20. *WA* 6, 369; Cf. Vilmos Vasta, *Luther on Worship* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), p. 17.
21. *WA* 12, 470; Cf. Althaus, p. 320.
22. Cf. Gerrish, p. 414.
23. *WA* 50, 633; 10 III, 397; 10 I, 2, 239; 12, 189; 10 3, 216; 8, 495; Cf. Gerrish, p. 414.
24. Cf. Gerrish, p. 414.
25. Gerrish, p. 414.
26. *WA* 50, 647; Cf. Althaus, p. 324.
27. *WA* 10 1, 2, 120, 122, Cf. Ruben Josephson, "The Ministry as an Office of the Church," *This Is the Church*, ed. by Anders Nygren (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1952), p. 274, 275.
28. Gerrish, p. 414.
29. Cf. Mark Ellington, "Luther's Concept of the Ministry: The Creative Tension," *Word and World* (Fall 1981), p. 344.
30. Cf. Ellington, pp. 345, 346.
31. Cf. Gerrish, p. 415.
32. Cf. Noll, p. 7.
33. See for example the response of Thomas Mostert, President of the Southeastern California Conference, to the "AAF Report on Church Structure," *Spectrum*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (August, 1984), p. 60, 61.
34. See the reply of Nathan Schilt, member of AAF Task Force on Church Structure, to Thomas Mostert, *Spectrum*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (August, 1984), pp. 61,62.