

Universal Priesthood: Keeping the Unfulfilled Promise

Theological Grounding for the Life of Faith Initiative

Craig L. Nesson
Wartburg Theological Seminary
Dubuque, Iowa, U.S.A.

Luther's teaching about the universal priesthood of all believers remains an unfulfilled promise of the Reformation. If justification and vocation are the twin pillars¹ of the Lutheran Reformation, the bearers of this legacy have granted prominent place to justification, while relegating vocation to a marginal position, never keeping the promise of Luther's teaching about the universal priesthood. Instead of developing the fulsome potential of Luther's theology of vocation in tandem with justification, the universal priesthood of all believers as it is lived out in the arenas of their daily lives has remained on the margins.

Jürgen Moltmann affirms vocation as "the third great insight of the Reformation" after Word and Sacrament.² When Luther deconstructed the "three walls" built to defend the power of the late medieval Roman Catholic Church—ecclesial claims to superiority over temporal power, ecclesial claims to authority above the interpretation of Scripture, and excessive claims to papal authority—he did so to recover the equal status of all the baptized alongside priests, bishops, and popes: "This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people."³

The central point is not about diminishing the service of pastors as ministers of Word and Sacrament. Pastors have a crucial calling in a theology of ministry oriented towards the ministry of the baptized. Rather, the point is specifically about *the equal status of all Christian persons by virtue of baptism and baptism alone*.⁴ The central claim: *baptism is the primary ordination of all Christians*. The retrieval of a robust understanding of vocation is urgently needed to reform the church's mission in service to neighbors for the life of the world and integrity of creation.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ: Freedom FOR Baptismal Vocation in the Arenas of Daily Life

In *The Freedom of a Christian* Luther elaborates how faith unites the soul with Christ, described as the sweet exchange: "Christ is full of grace, life and salvation while the soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith enter the picture and sins, death, and damnation are Christ's while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's. For if Christ is a bridegroom he must take upon himself that which are his

1 Cf. Mark Tranvik, *Martin Luther and the Called Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 164.

2 Jürgen Moltmann, "Reformation and Revolution," in *Martin Luther and the Modern Mind*, ed. Manfred Hoffmann, *Toronto Studies in Theology* 22 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon, 1985), 86; cited by Kathryn Kleinhans, "The Work of a Christian: Vocation in Lutheran Perspective," *Word and World* 25 (Fall 2005): 395.

3 Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German People* (1520), trans. Charles M. Jacobs, LW 44:127.

4 Cf. Timothy J. Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops: Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 7-8.

bride's, and he in turn bestows on her all that is his."⁵ Christian freedom originates with the work of Christ whose Gospel sets Christians completely free from every form of bondage. This grounds Christian vocation entirely in the doctrine of justification.

The first thesis, however, is not complete without the second. Without this intrinsic connection, as Bonhoeffer argued, grace becomes cheap and discipleship undermined. Because the Christian is free from sin, death, and the devil, Christians do not remain preoccupied about their status or worth. For Christ's sake, we are the beloved ones of God. Our sins are forgiven, therefore we need no longer be troubled about our inherent value in relationship to God.

Exactly because Christ sets us free from all things that sever our relationship with God, now our attention can be redirected *from preoccupation with what God thinks about us to focus instead on what our neighbor needs from us*. God, for Christ's sake, does not need our good works; it is our neighbor who does need our good works.⁶

This is the true and proper use of good works, in relationship to the needs of the neighbor.⁷ "This teaching tells us that the good we have from God should flow from one to the other and be common to all. Everyone should 'put on' the neighbor and act toward him or her as if we were in the neighbor's place. The good that flowed from Christ flows into us."⁸

Luther does not leave this teaching about neighbor love abstract. All Christians share a single status (*Stand*) by virtue of our singular baptism into Christ⁹, yet there are distinct arenas in which Christians live out their love of neighbor in the world.¹⁰ We serve the neighbors God gives us in our own family, at work or in school, in public life, and through religious institutions. These represent the primary arenas where the baptized are called to love and serve others as neighbors. Moreover, it is urgent for us to add that each of these spheres of influence are located within the context of creation, whose elements, flora, and fauna we also love as neighbors from God.

A New Babylonian Captivity: The Churchification of Christian Ministry

The church in our time faces a Babylonian captivity as all-encompassing and debilitating as that criticized by Luther in the 16th century. Then the captivity involved the church's usurpation of power over every facet of human life, asserting authority to control each and every arena. Today's Babylonian captivity is equally deadly for the vitality of the church's mission: the reduction of Christian ministry to what is done in the name of the institutional church.

⁵ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), trans. and intro. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 62.

⁶ Cf. Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 84.

⁷ Craig L. Nesson, "Law, Righteousness, Reason, Will, and Works: Civil and Theological Uses," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 41(February 2014): 55-56.

⁸ Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 88.

⁹ Timothy J. Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops*, 5.

¹⁰ Cf. Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops*, 7-14. *Amt* here will be translated as arena, not office.

Church members largely think that only what is organized by the institutional church or done within the confines of a church building really count as Christian ministry.¹¹ Another mighty wall has been constructed aimed at securing the self-interest of the church as institution: the compartmentalization of Christian existence by confining it to those activities organized and conducted by the institutional church. This represents the "churchification" of Christian ministry. While leaders of the institutional church pay lip service to the universal priesthood, primary attention in outreach too often involves securing financial resources and new members for the sake of the survival of the church as institution. The gap between what happens for the institutional church, especially on Sundays, and the involvement of people the rest of the week is enormous.

The way forward for the revitalization of the institutional church, and in particular congregations as an expression of the church, necessitates a paradigm shift in how we understand what it means to be missional church. *Congregations are called to become teaching and learning communities, gathered around the Word, to equip and send the baptized into their diverse ministries in daily life.* This purpose requires our undivided attention for church renewal.

The primary vocation of Christians is to live out the covenant God in Christ made with us in baptism: "to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth."¹²

Affirming baptism as the primary ordination lends significance and status to all the baptized as ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Again, this should not be construed as a threat to the value of pastoral ministry or the need for healthy congregations. Ordained ministers serve Word and Sacrament through preaching, teaching, worship leadership, and pastoral care, in order that healthy congregations might empower and equip the baptized as the Gospel sets people free *from* all that holds them captive and free *for* serving all their neighbors in the arenas of daily life. This is an indispensable calling by pastors within God's mission for the life of the world.

The Reformation's Unfulfilled Promise: Toward a Life of Faith Movement

For Luther "faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace so certain that you could stake your life on it one thousand times."¹³ However, Luther's affirmation of the universal priesthood has remained an unfulfilled promise of the Reformation.

At the 500th anniversary of the Reformation a movement has emerged within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America called the Life of Faith Initiative.¹⁴ This movement aims to reinvigorate the ministry of all the baptized in many, varied forms of service to neighbors through family, workplace, school, local community, and world. The purpose of the Life of Faith Initiative is to provoke a culture change that frees us to make *service by the baptized in the arenas of daily life the central focus of the church's mission, and in so doing revitalize the institutional church.*

¹¹ See Dwight L. DuBois, *The Scattering: Imagining a Church that Connects Faith and Life* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015), esp. Chapter 2.

¹² "Affirmation of Baptism," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 237.

¹³ Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament," LW 35:370-371.

¹⁴ Life of Faith Initiative: Trusting Jesus. Serving Our Neighbors. <http://lifeoffaith.info/> 25 June 2017.

The Life of Faith Initiative is a grassroots movement encouraging denominations, synods, congregations, and church members, from children to adults, to claim their ministries in daily life. The Initiative embraces the theme: “Trusting Jesus. Serving Our Neighbors.” Each local community is challenged to make the Life of Faith Initiative a vital part of its own ministry.

If the universal priesthood is the unfulfilled promise of the Reformation, it is imperative for church leaders to address this deficit by refocusing our attention on equipping church members for Christian vocation, claiming baptism as ordination to ministry as we serve the neighbors God gives us in each arena of daily life.