

# Boundaries and horizons: Luther on the church and its priesthood

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*It would please me very much if this word 'priest' were used as commonly as the term 'Christians' is applied to us.*

*For priests, the baptised, and Christians are all one and the same.*

(Martin Luther on 1 Peter 2:9)<sup>1</sup>

Although the 'priesthood of all believers' has long been regarded as one of Martin Luther's signature reformation insights, it is all too often presented in terms that fail to take full account of its place within his overall theological framework, or that confine its relevance to the early stages of Luther's break with Rome. Further, its relationship to the church's public ministry has been much debated by Lutheran theologians for more than a century, and one influential study characterises the priesthood of all believers as a 'pious myth', the later invention of the Lutheran pietists distorting a proper view of the church and its ministry.<sup>2</sup> In less contentious terms, this article summarises Luther's teaching on 'the common priesthood' to demonstrate that it was a persistent and pervasive element of his ecclesiology, closely related to his understanding of the church as the communion of saints.<sup>3</sup>

A wide-ranging examination of Luther's writings shows that his teaching was based on his understanding that in the New Testament Christ himself is King and High Priest, and his fellow-priests are all those who, baptised into Christ's family, are united in prayer, sacrifice, and the proclamation of God's word. This study proposes that Luther continued to use the common priesthood as a significant biblical expression of Christian spiritual life, worship and service throughout his career, and used a group of key biblical texts to link church and priesthood through the themes of unity and community, equality and participation.

When the boundaries and horizons of Luther's teaching are tested and explored in this way, giving voice to the common priesthood on its own terms, it becomes possible to present a vision of the church in which priesthood and public ministry are seen as complementary partners in the worship, life and mission of the Christian community, united in Christ by the word and faith. That task is addressed in the conclusions to this study.

1 WA 12:317,9–11 = LW 30:63.

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

3 This article is a synopsis of the key findings of Roger Whittall, *Martin Luther's 'Common Priesthood': Its Boundaries and Horizons*, DTh dissertation, University of Divinity, 2021. Notes have been reduced to a bare minimum; see the listed resources for the background to the study and further references.

## The common priesthood in Luther's writings

Famously, Luther's reform writings of 1520 made powerful use of the language and theology of the common priesthood in his critique of the church's hierarchy. He was using a traditional concept in a transformative way to challenge the separation of Christendom into two 'estates' (clerical and lay) and the political, social, and spiritual dominance of the Roman clerical hierarchy. In *The Address to the Christian Nobility* and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther argued from 1 Peter 2:9 and other texts that the true New Testament priesthood embraces all the baptised, and that there can be no spiritual elite in the church that Christ founded: the only true priesthood in the church is that of Christ himself. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, he wrote that

Not only are we the freest of kings, we are also priests forever, which is far more excellent than being kings, for as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things. These are the responsibilities [*officia*] of priests, and they cannot be granted to any unbeliever. Thus Christ has made it possible for us, provided we believe in him, to be not only his kin, his co-heirs, and fellow-kings, but also his fellow-priests. Therefore we may boldly come into the presence of God in the spirit of faith and cry 'Abba, Father!' pray for one another, and do all things which we see done and foreshadowed in the outer and visible works of priests.<sup>4</sup>

The persistence of this teaching is confirmed in a number of significant works from the length and breadth of Luther's career, and not just in the three Reformation treatises of 1520. The following should be especially noted: *The Misuse of the Mass* (1522), *The Exposition of 1 Peter* (1522), *Concerning the Ministry* (1523), *The Private Mass and Consecration of Priests* (1533), *The Sermons on Psalm 110* (1535), *The Sermons on John 14–16* (1537), and *The Sermon at the Dedication of Torgau Castle Church* (1544). Further evidence is to be found in his biblical lectures, and in his New Testament sermons edited and republished as *The Church Postil* in 1540. Even if there were no other sources, these would be more than sufficient to establish the continuing presence of this teaching in Luther's ecclesiology and to confirm its relationship to his fundamental biblical insights regarding the word and faith.

Luther employed the common priesthood not only to reject the exclusive claims of the ordained, hierarchical priesthood, but also to present a holistic view of the Christian life and of the church and its ministry in works such as *The Freedom of a Christian*, *The Exposition of First Peter*, and *Concerning the Ministry*. It represented the underlying motivation for much of his reforming work: in his translation of the bible (and the *Prefaces* that accompanied it), the preparation of new German orders and hymns that encouraged lay participation in worship, and catechisms for their instruction in the faith. Neither is its importance diminished by the weight Luther necessarily attached to the called preaching office as the public expression of the church's ministry. Particularly in *The Church Postil* and

4 WA 7:57,24–32 = LW 31:353 (translation altered). 'Kingship' is a Christian's spiritual autonomy in relation to the word and faith; 'Priesthood' confers the freedom—and responsibility—to engage in prayer, worship and teaching, in mutual service of the community of believers.

his published biblical expositions (*Isaiah 40–66, Sermons on Psalm 110*) Luther continued to teach the common priesthood as a substantial explanation of what it means to live and serve as a baptised Christian in the sight of God and together with fellow Christians in the community of the church (see also *Sermons on John 14–16*).

However, the social and political circumstances of the times in which Luther lived and worked as a reforming theologian imposed their own restrictions upon the outcomes of his work and the extent of his reforms. Religious upheaval, the conflicts with Rome and the radical preachers together with a general lack of education were important factors that meant that his vision for the common priesthood was constrained within the boundaries of these realities. One response was to expand his ecclesiastical focus to the home and the family as a setting in which the faith could be taught and personal worship and prayer encouraged for all Christians.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, Luther did not fully articulate his understanding of church and priesthood in every writing or confession of faith. For example, neither the common priesthood nor the public ministry are discussed explicitly in relation to the *Third Article of the Creed* in Luther's Catechisms, even while the explanations to that article teach that the church is the communion of saints and that God's word is essential to the church's life and worship. Almost in passing, his most substantial work on the church, *On the Councils and the Church* (1538), makes it clear what it means to be 'a Christian holy people' and the essential involvement of all Christians with the spiritual purposes for which the word and the sacraments are given and received. Ultimately, for the church and its true priesthood all that matters is the word, and faith:

[T]he question of whether you are male or female, young or old, need not be argued—just as little as it matters in baptism and the preached word. It is enough that you are consecrated and anointed with the sublime and holy chrism of God, with the word of God, with baptism, and also this sacrament [of the Lord's Supper]; then you are anointed highly and gloriously enough and sufficiently vested with priestly garments.<sup>6</sup>

### **The common priesthood in the context of Luther's ecclesiology**

Luther's fundamental insight is that the holy Christian church is *the communion of saints*: it is the faithful people of God, formed by the word of God. The church is first of all a spiritual community united in its faith and mission, rather than a structured, hierarchical organisation.

His teaching about the common priesthood, on the basis of key biblical texts, is one of the ways in which he identifies and clarifies the implications of this spiritual understanding of the church, in the context of the church's confession of faith. Under Christ the High Priest, and empowered by the Spirit, the church is the creature of God's word, and its servant.

5 'Every father of a family is a bishop in his house and the wife a bishopess...in your homes help us to carry on the ministry [*das predigtamt treiben*] as we do in church' WA 30/1:58,8–11 = LW 51:137 (Sermon on the First Commandment, 1528).

6 WA 50:631,16–21 = LW 41:152.

Together, Christians form the community of those who hear, believe, and speak the word of God, and live by it (Ps 110; Isa 54:13; 1 Pet 2:5–9; Rom 12:1; 1 Cor 14); and this church is the body of Christ and the communion of saints (Rom 12:1–8; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:1–13; Gal 3:26–9; Eph 4:1–13).

These biblical texts which shaped Luther's ecclesiology can be presented in terms of four inter-related themes: unity and community; equality and participation. The themes reflect the way in which Luther himself summarises the key Pauline texts when he teaches about the church and reveals his full understanding of the *communion of saints* at the heart of his ecclesiology. The teaching unfolds from its theological core: always, it was faith alone, born of the gospel, that defined for Luther what it means to be a spiritual person ('justification by faith'). This faith, nurtured by an active engagement with Christ's word (*unity* and *communion* with Christ), remains essential to all those whose lives are joined in Christian community (*unity* and *communion* with fellow saints), those who as *equal* priests serve (*participate*) in Christ's church. Seen in a close relationship to his creedal understanding that the church is *the communion of saints*, this is the basis on which Luther asserts throughout his life, 'we are all priests'.<sup>7</sup> It is also the way that the common priesthood expresses an individual's standing *coram Deo*, as well as the corporate character of God's people, gathered for service in the church, and sent out into God's world. In *Concerning the Ministry*, Luther writes,

We are priests, as Christ is Priest, God's children as he is, kings as he is King. For he makes us to sit with him in heavenly places, as companions and co-heirs with him, in whom and with whom all things are given us. And many similar expressions indicate our oneness with Christ—one loaf, one cup, one body, members of his body, one flesh, bone of his bone, and we are told we have all things in common with him.<sup>8</sup>

### Luther's sermons on John 14–16 (1533–4), and 17 (1528)

These ecclesiological themes are to be seen in many of his writings, including those in which he argued for a biblical understanding of the church against the hierarchical or clerical view of its structure and life. But they are also present in the later writings where Luther employs them as the building blocks for the life and faith of the church and its members. Here—within the limitations of this article—one group of published sermons can encapsulate the themes and demonstrate the importance of Luther's teaching on the common priesthood in its own right, apart from disputes over the nature of the church and the boundaries of its public ministry.

Luther often expressed his admiration for the Gospel of John, and valued it for its profound exposition of Christ's own message.<sup>9</sup> Over the years, he preached several series of

7 See (e.g.) WA 6:408,13 = LW 44:128; LW 6:564,11 = LW 36:113; and WA 40/2:595,25 = LW12:289 (*Commentary on Psalm 45*, 1533–34).

8 WA 12:179,18–24 = LW 40:20 (translation altered).

9 Jaroslav Pelikan writes: '[o]f all the books in the New Testament, Luther seems to have prized the Gospel according to St. John most highly. And within this Gospel his favourite portion was the closing discourse of Jesus, set down in chapters 14, 15, and 16' (LW 24:ix).

sermons on this gospel when he substituted for Bugenhagen during the latter's absences from the town church. The sermons on the early chapters of John were not published during Luther's lifetime, but Casper Cruciger had published the sermons on John 17 in 1530 and then the series on chapters 14–16 in 1538–9. Luther regarded this as among his best work.<sup>10</sup>

The upper room discourse in John's Gospel, culminating in the high-priestly prayer of John 17, shows how Luther continued to integrate the themes of priesthood and ministry within these later sermons.<sup>11</sup> At a time when Luther repeatedly emphasised the ordered call to the public ministry as a divine ordinance, he did not lay aside his understanding that Christ bestowed the fulness of his ministry upon the whole church. Led by their called ministers, all Christians have responsibility to ensure that the word is heard. In John's Gospel this derives from the work of Christ himself who acts through his disciples, who are sent out to serve in their particular contexts and offices.

In the upper room, Christ commissions and consecrates all Christians to be his representatives, according to Luther. It is not just the apostles who receive this charge, although their primary responsibility is clear, as is that of those called to public ministry. The word is spoken to all and is for all, and its transmission ('confession') is the responsibility of all who hear and receive it. Commenting on John 14:10 ('The words that I speak to you'), Luther says, 'It is all from God, who condescends to enter the mouth of each Christian or preacher'.<sup>12</sup> This is consistent with Luther's understanding of the common priesthood, even when it is not specifically named; his chief emphasis here is on the apostolic transmission of the word. Themes of equality and participation are behind the spiritual realities at work when Jesus addresses his disciples, preparing them for what must happen to him, and how they are to respond to these imminent events. In preaching this, Luther brings his hearers into the dialogue between Christ and his disciples. When Jesus speaks of the 'greater works' to be done by those who believe in him (14:12), there is no distinction being made between the apostles and the rest of Christendom:

Every individual Christian is one such as the Lord Christ Himself was on earth. Each one accomplishes great things. Each is able to govern the whole world in divine matters. Each can help and benefit everybody, and does the greatest works on earth. Each one is also regarded more highly by God than the entire world is.<sup>13</sup>

Because of this, the world is preserved for the sake of the Christians, and because of the work they perform for its benefit. Luther says, 'In the first place, Christians have the Gospel, Baptism, and the Sacrament...They are able to teach and instruct people in all walks of life and to help them live in a Christian and blessed way'.<sup>14</sup> In the second place, there is prayer, through which both spiritual and temporal blessings come. And then,

10 See LW 24:x for Luther's comment, 'This is the best book I have ever written'. For further details see LW 69:8.

11 They stand alongside other works from the 1530s such as *The Private Mass* and *Psalms 110*.

12 WA 45:521,28–29 = LW 24:66.

13 WA 45:532,5–10 = LW 24:78 (translation altered).

14 WA 45:532,37–533,4 = LW 24:79.

All this, Christ says, is to come to pass through the Christians, because they believe in him and derive everything from him as their Head. Yes, all this is to be done by each individual Christian, and Christ can say: 'The works which I do are done by every baptised Christian today'. Consequently, the Christians are genuine helpers and saviours, yes, lords and gods of the world.<sup>15</sup>

This work involves both prayer and teaching, and a restless compulsion to share a 'spirit of compassion and supplication' with one's neighbours. 'With these and the following words', Luther says, 'Christ also demonstrates what constitutes a Christian's true office and work, and how necessary the exercise of this is in Christendom'.<sup>16</sup>

In practice, this happens through the natural orders God has placed in his world. For Luther, these always include the church and the home, each with its own appointed servants. Speaking of the delusion of separating God from his work in the world (John 14:11), he says:

Ask yourself if you delight wholeheartedly in what Christ proclaims and does for you through his Christians, such as preachers, father, mother, and other pious people... He ordered and ordained all the offices and estates in Christendom for the purpose of filling the entire world with the works of God; and you ignore all this as though it were of no account. You think to yourself: 'God dwells up in heaven among the angels and is occupied with other matters. How can a preacher or a father or a mother help me? If only I could hear and see God Himself!'<sup>17</sup>

This matches other places where Luther places parents alongside of preachers, as an example of those whose God-given task ('office') involves the teaching of the gospel.<sup>18</sup> Yet always this identity as God's servants does not depend on human credentials, but it is the work of Christ himself, and the gift of the Spirit (John 14:15–31). Otherwise, the distinctions that apply in human society would still also pertain to the body of Christ. The church is always the communion of baptised saints, the fellowship of those justified by faith in Christ. And Luther grounds this spiritual reality very close to the actual places where his hearers live and work:

This is our comfort and our trust, that with good reason we may glory and confidently say: 'We are holy. We are members of a holy fraternity in Wittenberg, in Rome, in Jerusalem, and wherever holy Baptism and the Gospel are. And we do not regard one another otherwise than as saints of God. Even though we are still sinners and many failings always remain in our flesh and blood, He covers up our sins and impurities. Thus we are accounted entirely pure and holy before God, as long as we cling to

15 WA 45: 535,23–28 = LW 24:82.

16 WA 45:540,1–5 = LW 24:87 (translation altered).

17 WA 45:522,29–31 and 522,39–523,6 = LW 24:68.

18 See (e.g.) Luther's final sermon in Eisleben (15 February 1546), where he encourages his listeners to celebrate their access to God's Word, hidden from the wise and powerful: 'You hear [it] at home in your house, father and mother and children sing and speak of it, the preacher speaks of it in the parish church', WA 51:193,7–10 = LW 51:390, on Matthew 11:25–30.

Christ and His Baptism and rely on His blood'.<sup>19</sup>

These thoughts are intensified as Luther moves onto John 15:5 ('Whoever abides in me'), and the Johannine parable of the vine and the branches. Luther adds a favourite image from his ecclesiology (1 Cor 10:17) to describe the Christian community, and its work of love:

Thus Christ and the Christians become one loaf and one body, so that the Christian can bear good fruit—not Adam's or their own, but Christ's. For when a Christian baptizes, preaches, consoles, exhorts, works, and suffers, they do not do this as a human being descended from Adam; it is Christ who does this in them. The lips and tongue with which God's word is proclaimed and confessed Word are not theirs; they are Christ's lips and tongue. The hands with which they toil and serve the neighbour are the hands and members of Christ, who, as he says here, is in each Christian; and they are all in Christ.<sup>20</sup>

This proclamation of unity in Christ has set the scene for Luther to introduce the themes of priesthood and sacrifice into his exposition, even though the text of John 15 does not directly require them. But by taking up the thought of the disciples producing 'much fruit' (15:8), he explores the way in which this happens, to God's glory. It means that those who live as Christians are 'priests and servants of God who offer holy and acceptable sacrifices to my Father without ceasing' (Rom 12:1).<sup>21</sup> Christ himself in these words rejects any distinction between those considered to be 'spiritual' (the clergy), and those who 'worked on earth'.<sup>22</sup>

Rather, Luther says, Christian sacrifice is two-fold, in keeping with the dual nature of the life God desires. According to the first three commandments, 'the highest and foremost service of God is to preach and hear God's word, to administer the Sacraments, etc.' But also the second table of the law is involved,

to honour father and mother, to be patient, to live chastely and decently. For whoever lives such a life serves and honours the same God. Christ says: 'If you remain in me, I will consecrate you to be holy priests—priests of My Father'.<sup>23</sup>

The connection to Christ is what makes this possible, and that drives the unitary nature of Christian ministry. Luther makes no distinction between the status of laity and clergy in these verses, because they all serve God equally, as they are called do.

For Luther, this account of true Christian spirituality also means that the Father can only reject those who bring their own status or holiness, their own self-devised sacrifices (like the mass) into God's presence. He directly ascribes Peter's words (and Paul's) to Christ himself: 'But you', says *Christ*, 'are a holy people, true priests consecrated to God (1 Peter 2:9); and your works are holy and acceptable sacrifices' (Rom 12:1). This is the highest

19 WA 45:617,28–35 = LW 24:171.

20 WA 45:667,32–668,3 = LW 24:226 (translation altered).

21 WA 45:682,1–2 = LW 24:242.

22 WA 45:682,14–17 = LW 24:242.

23 WA 45:682,22–34 = LW 24:242.

service, and the highest offering, because it follows Christ and does what he does.<sup>24</sup> Along with the references to 1 Peter and the key verse from Romans 12, also Psalm 110 is quoted here by Luther, confirming that this is no casual introduction of the themes of priesthood into the discussion of the basic character of the Christian life. In what amounts to a classic summary statement of the common priesthood, highlighting its key biblical witnesses, he says,

The apostle St. Paul enlarges on this in Romans 12:1–2 when he says that our perfect spiritual service of God is really nothing else than to be this man's disciples and to become like him, those whose entire office and work is the pure worship of God and a holy sacrifice. Thus Psalm 110:4 declares: 'You are a Priest forever'; he also makes us who abide in him such priests.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from Christ, there is no true worship or priestly service (*priesterthum*) of God, there is only self-devised 'priestcraft' (*pfafferei*), typified for Luther by the sacrifice of the mass.<sup>26</sup> Later, (John 15:16), where Jesus returns to the subject of prayer, Luther indicates the acceptability of Christian prayer. As with the 'Our Father', all Christians have the right to bring their prayers to God, in Jesus' name, and because of his promise:

We have been ordained through him to the priestly office. Hence we can and must step before God joyfully, as we bring both our own need and that of others before him, assured by his promise that our prayers will be heard and that he will say yes and amen to them.<sup>27</sup>

Luther's ecclesiological core here carries him beyond the harsh realities of the current church situation, and the polemics with which he engaged in that struggle.<sup>28</sup> Christ's promises are for all Christians who share the same word, the sacraments, the creed, and the Lord's Prayer. In this way, the 'true church' includes all those—throughout the world—who are 'gathered and united in Christ'.<sup>29</sup> So, in keeping with Christ's words to his disciples, and anticipating his high priestly prayer in John 17, Luther returns to the theme of unity, recalling its Pauline terms:

He makes us equal to himself in all things; his prayer and ours must be one, just as his body is ours and his members are ours. Thus St. Paul says in Ephesians 5:30: 'We are members of his body', of His flesh and bone.<sup>30</sup>

24 WA 45:682,39–683,4 = LW 24:243 (emphasis added).

25 WA 45:683,16–21 = LW 24:243.

26 WA 45:683,22–35 = LW 45:243–4.

27 WA 45:702,10–14 = LW 24:264 (translation modified).

28 WA 45:703–733 = LW 24:264–98. John 15:18–27 leads Luther to discuss the persecution suffered by the evangelicals, as the reality for all those who follow Christ and preach his cross.

29 WA 46:11,3–21 and 22–30 = LW 24:309–10, on John 16:1–2. There are those who are the church in name only, and those who cling to the church's 'essence', salvation by faith in Christ alone. See also WA 46:6,10–12 = LW 24:304, where Luther 'concedes...that the papacy has God's word and the office of the apostles, and that we have received Holy Scripture, Baptism, the Sacrament, and the pulpit from them'.

30 WA 46:98,8–10 = LW 24:407 (translation modified).



Luther had already preached a series of eight sermons on John 17 at the Town Church during August to October 1528.<sup>31</sup> In the first sermon, Luther identifies the significance of this chapter as Christ's high-priestly prayer:

After a good sermon belongs a good prayer...[the Lord Christ] had to offer up a final supplication as well, both for [the disciples] and for all Christians, so that he might perfectly fulfil his office as our sole High Priest and leave nothing undone that might serve to strengthen and sustain them.<sup>32</sup>

This unique priestly office involves the self-offering on the cross, by which Christ sanctifies himself (John 17:19),<sup>33</sup> and then sanctifies his disciples. This means, says Luther, that the holiest life or estate on earth is not an earned holiness, but 'none other than the common Christian estate'.<sup>34</sup> The true saints, he says, are those who are not ashamed to pray for forgiveness: they must be 'good strong sinners'.<sup>35</sup> So Christ prays that all would believe, through the apostles' word (John 17:20), and that they would all share in his unity, with the Father (John 17:21). Christ's prayer means that a believer is 'one body and loaf with all Christendom', and each participates and shares in the struggles and joys of the other. This 'friendly exchange' includes 'bearing faults' and sharing possessions.<sup>36</sup> Christendom, Luther says, is 'a powerful lady [*gewaltige frau*] and an empress in heaven and on earth...when she speaks a word'.<sup>37</sup> In the fertile rhetoric of Luther's pulpit, Mother Church becomes Queen Christendom, and she proclaims the same word that bestowed royal status on her and all her children.

These sermons on John 14–17 confirm how this Gospel underpinned the development and later expressions of Luther's biblical theology. His christological focus was abundantly clear, and this shaped his teaching on church and priesthood. There is an emphasis on Christian participation in Christ's priesthood, and its relationship to the teaching on word and faith. It also presents the themes of unity and communion within that same context. In this way, it shows how Luther sharpened his original insights on the common priesthood to reveal its connections to Christ's own teaching and ministry. He is able to use the Johannine presentation of Jesus' self-understanding, his incarnation and his relationship with the disciples, to portray the priesthood's primary connection to the work of Christ and to the apostolic ministry. At the same time, the Pauline themes of the key texts for church and priesthood remain apparent in his teaching, even when he is not quoting them directly.

31 These details are provided in the introduction to LW 69:3–9.

32 WA 28:73,19–27 = LW 69:15.

33 WA 28:174,36–175,13 = LW 69:98–9.

34 WA 28:176,25–30 = LW 69:100.

35 WA 28:177,28–33 = LW 69:101.

36 WA 28:182,21–23 = LW 69:104.

37 WA 28:182,33–183,16 = LW 69:105.

### **'We are all priests': contemporary horizons of Luther's teaching<sup>38</sup>**

- a. Luther taught that *all* Christians are priests. This means that by faith, all Christians stand in an equal spiritual relationship with God, sharing the same status with one another within the community of the church. Beyond the boundaries inherent in the situation in which Luther lived and worked, and the limitations that the church itself has at times imposed upon Luther's teaching, there are clear markers ('horizons') in his teaching that point towards the application of the common priesthood in the life of the church today.
- b. In applying Luther's teaching, its biblical foundations always need to be acknowledged. Luther taught that the common priesthood is based on Christ's own messianic office as eternal king and priest (Ps 110; Hebrews). Baptised into Christ and united with him by faith, Christians are consecrated into Christ's priestly service (1 Pet 2:1–10). With no exceptions, the title 'Christian' conveys the highest—and only—spiritual status in the church.
- c. As an expression of the life of Christ in the church, the common priesthood sits at the interface of the church's inner, spiritual reality and its outward, public ordering. In and of itself, the work of this priesthood remains hidden, in the same way that the word and faith themselves work largely unseen in the lives of individual Christians, and in the Christian community (Eph 4:1–6). Its presence is perceived, as is the life of the church, by the marks of the church (word, sacraments, ministry); in its practice of worship and prayer; and by the fruits of faith (love, sacrifice, humility, patience, etc.). Of prime importance is the word, and faith.
- d. Luther's view of priesthood therefore contains two inter-related aspects: individual Christian identity and communal Christian character, and only when they are considered together can we fully explore what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be the church.
- e. *As a priest*, each individual Christian stands in a direct relationship with God, through faith in Christ ('justification by faith'). Through the ministry of God's word and by the work of the Spirit, all Christians hear God's voice (John 6:45), and receive all of God's spiritual blessings in Christ, and are called into God's family. In faith, they respond to God with prayer and praise. With Christ's own authority, they tell of God's love in word and deed (John 20:21–3, 1 Pet 2:9). Through Christ, they offer the 'living sacrifice', the life of faith manifested in love and service (Rom 12:1–8).
- f. *As priests together*, the Christian community displays its essential character when it gathers to worship God. Together, Christians participate as equal priests in the church's ministry of word and sacraments, hearing and speaking God's word, receiving and sharing as their common possessions the gifts of God's grace (1 Cor 14). This means that they offer each other the comforting promise of forgiveness in the name of Christ ('the office of the keys', Matt 16:18–19, 18:18–19). They pray and work for one

<sup>38</sup> This section draws out the implications of Luther's teaching for the church today, and summarises conclusions to the entire thesis, not only the extracts given above.

another, for God's world, and for all its people. They teach and encourage one another with God's word. Children are baptised and nurtured in the family and in the church. In all these ways, Christians share a common responsibility for the apostolic ministry and mission of the church.

- g. While pastors are recognised and called as people specially gifted for the public ministries of preaching and teaching (1 Cor 4:1, Eph 4:11–12), that does not mean that lay people are merely bystanders and spectators in the church, the passive recipients of this ministry. They affirm, support, and work together with those who have been entrusted with the public offices of the word. But the church's ministry has a broader context and greater needs than can be adequately fulfilled by even the most gifted of individuals. Luther's teaching means that people and pastors—as priests together—are called to a mutual engagement in the life and worship of the Christian community so as to nurture and share all the gifts of God, to glory of God and the welfare of Christ's people (Rom 12:1–8, 1 Cor 12:1–13, Eph 4:1–13, 1 Pet 2:1–10). What Christ offers and promises to one, he gives to all.
- h. This means that when a church like the LCANZ encourages the active cooperation of laity and pastors to develop and expand its mission and ministry it can do so from a sound theological base and the knowledge that this represents the fulness of God's plan. Such cooperation does not subvert the position of church's called public ministry but rather fully mobilises its God-given resources at the service of the gospel in the world. When appropriately-gifted lay people are chosen and appointed from within the congregation to work alongside of pastors in the worship, teaching, and caring ministries of the church, they do so in order to strengthen and enhance those ministries and are not supplanting or limiting the role of the pastor. Rather, this fulfils the potential inherent in the nature of the church and its gathered people as the communion of saints, and benefits the church by releasing pastors for more effective ministry and by helping and encouraging all Christians to discover what it means for their lives of faith, worship and service that as God's people 'we are all priests'.
- i. The two aspects—the personal and the communal—are integral to Luther's teaching that the church is God's holy people, gathered around the word and the sacraments and placed in God's world to proclaim God's love in Christ to all people. Together God's people work to fulfil the promise and the challenge of 1 Peter 2:9: '[Y]ou are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light'. They are the 'communion of saints' and they are the people who, like *Christ with all his Christians, are priests*.<sup>39</sup>

39 WA 17/2:6,30 = LW 76:182 (*Sermon on Romans 12:1–3*, 1525/40).

## Primary sources for Luther's teaching on the common priesthood and the church

- The Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, 1520 (LW 44:123–217)  
*A Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520 (LW 36:11–126)  
*The Freedom of a Christian*, 1520 (LW 31:333–377)  
*The Answer to the...Book by Goat Emser*, 1521 (LW 39:143–228)  
*The Misuse of the Mass*, 1522 (LW 36:133–230)  
*The Exposition of First Peter*, 1522 (LW 30:3–145)  
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*Lectures on Isaiah 40-66* (1528–30) (LW 17:1–416)  
*The Private Mass and Consecration of Priests*, 1533 (LW 38:147–214),  
*The Sermons on Psalm 110*, 1535 (LW 13:223–348),  
*The Sermons on John 14–16*, 1537 (LW 24:1–426)  
*On the Councils and the Church*, 1539 (LW 41:9–178)  
*The Church Postil*, 1540–44 (LW 75–79)  
*The Lectures on Genesis*, 1535–45 (LW 1–8)  
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