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Baptists and the Ministry

LUTHER ON THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

INTRODUCTION

IN *The Apostolic Ministry* the late Bishop Kenneth E. Kirk described the Protestant doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" as meaning that a Protestant refuses "to have any man standing between himself and God." This is gross nonsense. Unfortunately, one dare not label it so without admitting that many Protestants themselves understand the doctrine in this way—whereupon gross nonsense graduates to pernicious nonsense.

Like the hospitable demon who brought in seven other demons more evil than himself, this misapprehension usually plays host to several other pernicious notions about the nature of faith, the Church, the Ministry, and the relation of the Church and the common life. Consider, for example, how familiar are ideas such as these: that faith is an individual and private relation of man to God (over against the allegedly collectivistic impersonal way of Rome); that the visible Church is really just a sociological convenience (or embarrassment!), of minor consequence to the Christian if only he cultivates the ideal of the "essential," "invisible" Church with its "spiritual" unity (over against the alleged institutionalism of Rome); that Protestantism essentially discards all real distinction between clergy and laity (over against the sacerdotalism of Rome); that there is no real distinction between the spiritual and the temporal spheres, between the sacred and the secular, since "all of life is sacred" (over against the ecclesiasticism of Rome).

All of these notions are wrong, in the classical Protestant tradition. The fact that at one point or another they all come so near being right makes them not less but more dangerously, insidiously wrong. If they are all brother-demons to the distorted notion that the "priesthood of believers" means a claim that "every believer is to be his own priest,"¹ then it would appear that a clarification of this great Protestant doctrine is an urgent ecumenical task.

Reappraisal of the priesthood of believers principle should begin with a return to the man who first thought the matter through, in deep travail of soul and mind. Martin Luther had been trying, during the second decade of the 16th century, to teach the Gospel, the message of salvation found in the Word of God. Throughout his lifetime he derived strength from the fact

that it was the Church which had called and commissioned him to teach the Gospel. He became convinced that the Word taught justification by grace through faith, and therefore that some current practices and teachings were dubious, some downright incompatible with the fundamental Gospel. But churchmen in the name of the Church forthwith began accusing him of blasphemy and heresy. Faced with this charge, Luther had to ask questions he had never asked before: is this really the Church, if it condemns this teaching of the Gospel, which is not mine but Christ's?

This is the story down to 1519-20. It was at this time that Luther was driven to find a clear answer to the problem: what is the Church? Romanists had their own criteria for answering this question, and by them they inevitably and easily stamped Luther a heretic. But Luther's question then became: on what basis, and by what right, have they set up these criteria? Is this what the Gospel really teaches?

The showdown came in 1520. In his *Address to the German Nobility* and his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther analyzed the foundations of the Roman Catholic position. The Romanists, he said, have created "three walls" behind which they have so entrenched themselves that no one has been able to reform them.² The first is their claim that "the spiritual is above the temporal power," whereby they have prevented any effective criticism by the laity. By the other two walls, the claims that the pope alone rules the interpretation of Scripture, and alone has the right to call a Council, they have prevented any correction from within the Church leadership itself. The first wall discloses the sacerdotalism of Rome, the second and third its hierarchicalism. Upon these premises Romanism has shaped God's revelation into a sacramental system, whereby an institution claims to be the divinely-established dispenser of God's grace and the rightful controller on earth of God's whole creation. As Luther reviewed the Roman Catholic sacramental system in *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, he perceived that priestly ordination was the keystone of it all; if this sacrament were to fail, the papacy itself would scarcely survive.³

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

In the face of all this, Luther had to answer not simply the question, what shall we do about the Church? but also, what really is the Church? Behind the need for action stood the need for theology, and behind theology the very nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Luther gave his answer first in terms of the priesthood of all believers. It must be kept in mind that he developed this expression to meet a very definite historical problem: a priestly tyranny. He found the expression useful even later, in other situations also,

for presenting Scriptural truth. But we must not treat this expression, priesthood of all believers, as if it says *all* that he found needed to be said about the Church. It does not convey his *whole* doctrine of the Church. Nevertheless it is true to say that all he said about the Church bears an integral relation to it.

What then is the Church of Jesus Christ?

Eck, Alveld, and company asserted that it is the institution or people whose ruler by divine right as well as human right is the pope.² Luther retorted :

The Scriptures speak of the Church (*Christenheit*) quite simply, and use the term in only one sense . . . , the Church is called the assembly of all the believers in Christ upon earth, just as we pray in the Creed : " I believe in the Holy Ghost, a communion of saints." This community or assembly consists of all those who live in true faith, hope and love; so that the essence, life and nature of the Church is not a bodily assembly, but an assembly of hearts in one faith, as St. Paul says, Eph. 4 : 5, " One baptism, one faith, one Lord."⁵

Accordingly, " The Church is a spiritual assembly of souls in one faith."⁶

What! Does this mean that the Church is not a palpable historical entity, but simply something invisible or ideal? Bishop Newbiggin, in his *Household of God*, a book otherwise so excellent that it is required reading for my Lutheran theological students, trips headlong over this term, " spiritual assembly." He selects Luther as the spokesman for the Protestant view of the Church, and Luther's *Papacy at Rome* as the adequate expression of Luther's view; then he proceeds to misinterpret both the context and the words. In part Luther's emphasis on the word " spiritual " is meant to combat the Roman Catholic idea that " spiritual " applies almost exclusively to the clergy and its possessions; ordination therefore provides " the roots of that detestable tyranny of the clergy over the laity!"⁷ But further, *Papacy at Rome* is a reply to Alveld, who was trying to silence Luther with this argument : Here, as anyone can see, is the Church; it is visible; a visible body must have one visible head; be silent and obey him. Against this kind of argument Luther protested. His protest did not assert that there is no palpability or historicity about the Church, any more than he suggested that souls normally live on earth without bodies; what he said was that " the Church is a spiritual community, which can be *classed with* a temporal community as little as spirits with bodies, or faith with temporal possessions."⁸ By " temporal community " Luther meant one " which must of necessity be bound to localities and places."⁹ The question here is the essence of the Church : what makes it what it is. What makes the Church essentially *different* from other social groups in the last analysis is something discernible on earth to faith, not to sight.

We shall return later to Newbigin's analysis of Luther's view of the Church. But meanwhile, two thoughts should be placed upon our mental cookstoves and started simmering. (1) *Papacy at Rome*, by itself or with the *Treatise concerning the Ban*, 1520, is not a broad enough screen on which to read Luther's whole conception of the Church clearly. The issue in *Papacy at Rome* concerned chiefly the second and third "walls" of the Romanists: whether the pope's great power is of "divine right."¹⁰ Luther replied: "It is clear that the Holy Church is not *bound* to Rome, but is as wide as the world, the assembly of those of one faith, a spiritual and not a bodily thing, for that which one believes is not bodily or visible"; the Church is in its essence an object of faith. But he went on:

"The *external marks*, whereby one can *perceive where* this Church is on earth, are baptism, the Sacrament (i.e. Lord's Supper), and the Gospel (i.e. preaching of the Word); and not Rome, or this place, or that . . . Neither Rome nor the papal power is a mark of the Church, for that power cannot *make Christians*, as baptism and the Gospel do; and therefore it does not belong to the true Church and is but a human ordinance."¹¹ "The conclusion is inevitable, that just as being in the Roman unity does not make one a Christian, so being outside of that unity does not make one a heretic or unchristian."¹²

In this treatise, however, Luther was not yet ready to attack the "first wall" (the sacerdotal principle) head-on, but his major weapons were already being prepared and wheeled into place: the Church is the assembly of believers, and believing laymen "are truly spiritual," as well as the clergy (p. 356); the "Keys" have been given to the whole Church in common (pp. 376ff), not to the hierarchical clergy alone; the pope indeed has authority, but "it is of human and not of divine right" (p. 375)—even on earth, no one should be called "Head" of the Church but Christ (pp. 357ff). Remember, in addition to all this, that when "spiritualising" Protestants tried to seize and run off with the concept of a spiritual assembly, Luther vigorously opposed them; this battle does not yet appear in *Papacy at Rome*.

(2) No one who has really read Luther can imagine that "spiritual assembly" meant for him that "external membership" in the Church is "a merely external" thing which can be severed without ultimate spiritual harm.¹³ Luther's labours as a practical churchman and his theological analysis of the sacraments are indications to the contrary. Still more explicitly is his word against Murner: "When I called the Church a spiritual assembly, you mocked me, as if I would build a church like Plato's city, which could be found nowhere."¹⁴ In reality, Luther did heroic service in rescuing the Biblical conception of spirit and flesh from the Greek-influenced conception of spirit as the antithesis of matter. Newbigin confused the issue when he interpreted Luther's view of

the ban as "substituting at this critical point for the true and biblical dialectic of holy and sinful, a false and unbiblical dialectic of outward and inward, visible and invisible." Actually, the issue is not the biblical dialectic of holy and sinful (which Luther brilliantly maintained in the bold paradox *simul peccator et justus*), but the biblical dialectic of spirit-and-flesh versus the unbiblical one of spirit-and-matter, while the dialectics of outward and inward, and visible and invisible, are not unbiblical at all: cf. *Eph.* iii. 16 and *Heb.* xi. 1, not to multiply references.

Luther's answer to entrenched sacerdotal Romanism came within a few months of the appearance of *Papacy at Rome*, in the great "Reformation manifestos." The answer was couched in Biblical terms which had contemporary relevance. The Church is the people of God: note, "people" is a singular, not a plural noun here! It is the fellowship or community of believers in Christ. Indeed, because of current unfortunate connotations in the normal word *Kirche*, Luther tried to emphasise this insight by replacing *Kirche* by *Christenheit* (not *Christentum*, by the way) and *Gemeinde* (fellowship or congregation) wherever possible.

Still more explicitly, what kind of people or fellowship is the Church? Luther answered, in attack against the "first wall": "All Christians are truly of the 'spiritual estate'." "Through baptism all of us are consecrated to the priesthood, as St. Peter says in I *Peter* ii. 9, 'Ye are a royal priesthood, a priestly kingdom,' and the book of *Revelation* says (v. 10), 'Thou hast made us by Thy blood to be priests and kings.'"¹⁵ Here in the *Address to the Nobility* the theme of the priesthood of all believers comes to clear statement, and it resounds again and again in the treatises of 1520 and in subsequent years when the battle had widened to two fronts. The easiest way to locate the passages is to find all the citations of I *Peter* ii. 9 in the Scriptural indexes of the various volumes of Luther's works.

THE CHURCH AS A PRIESTHOOD

The Church *is* a priesthood. This is both more fundamental and more accurate than to say, the Church *has* a priesthood. But where does the accent then lie? On every Christian's "right" to approach God without any priestly intermediary? Not at all! Here Luther's *Treatise on Christian Liberty* is instructive. In this work, as is well known, Luther expounded the paradox that a Christian is perfectly free, subject to none, and at the same time perfectly a servant, subject to all. The first member of the paradox describes a Christian's faith, the second his love. But now look a little closer. We find a discussion of what "priest" means, and why therefore Christ is the one true priest, and in what sense then a Christian is a priest.

That we may look more deeply into that grace which our inward man has in Christ, we must consider that in the Old Testament God sanctified to Himself every first-born male, and the birth-right was highly prized, having a two-fold honour, that of priesthood, and that of kingship. For the first-born brother was priest and lord over all the others, and was a type of Christ, the true and only First-born of God the Father and of the Virgin Mary, and true King and Priest, not after the fashion of the flesh and of the world. For His kingdom is not of this world. He *reigns* in heavenly and spiritual things and consecrates them—such as righteousness, truth, wisdom, peace, salvation, etc. Not as if all things on earth and in hell were not also subject to Him—else how could He protect and save us from them?—but His Kingdom consists neither in them nor of them. Nor does His *priesthood* consist in the outward splendour of robes and postures, like that human priesthood of Aaron and of our present-day Church; but it consists in spiritual things, through which He by an unseen service intercedes for us in heaven before God, there offers Himself as a sacrifice and does all things that a priest should do, as Paul in the Epistle to the Hebrews describes Him under the type of Melchizedek. Nor does He only pray and intercede for us, but within our soul He teaches us through the living teaching of His Spirit, thus performing the two real functions of a priest, of which the prayers and the preaching of human priests are visible types.

Now, just as Christ by His birthright obtained these two prerogatives, so He imparts them to and shares them with every one who believes on Him according to the law of the aforesaid marriage, by which the wife owns whatever belongs to the husband. Hence *we are all priests and kings in Christ*, as many as believe on Christ, as I Peter 2 : 9 says, "Ye are a chosen generation, a peculiar people, a royal priesthood and priestly kingdom, that ye should show forth the virtues of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light."

The priesthood and kingship we explain as follows: First, as to the *kingship*, every Christian is by faith so exalted above all things that by a spiritual power he is lord of all things without exception, so that nothing can do him any harm whatever, nay, all things are made subject to him and compelled to serve him to his salvation . . . (Rom. 8 : 28, I Cor. 3 : 22f). Not as if every Christian were set over all things, to possess and control them by physical power—a madness with which some churchmen are afflicted—for such power belongs to kings, princes and men on earth. . . . The power of which we speak is spiritual; it rules in the midst of enemies, and is mighty in the midst of oppression, which means nothing else than that strength is made perfect in weakness, and that in all things I can find profit unto salvation, so that the cross and death itself are compelled to serve me and to work together with me for my salvation. . . . Lo, this is the inestimable power and liberty of Christians.

Not only are we the freest of kings, we are also *priests* forever, which is far more excellent than being kings, because as priests we are *worthy to appear before God and to pray for others and to teach one another the things of God*. For these are the functions of priests, and cannot be granted to any unbeliever. Thus Christ has obtained for us, if we believe on Him, that we are not only His brethren, co-heirs and fellow-kings with him, but also fellow-priests with Him, who 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 prefigured in the outward and visible works of priests . . . Who then can comprehend the lofty dignity of the Christian? Through his *kingly* power he rules over all things, death, life and sin, and through his *priestly* glory is all powerful with God, because God does the things which he asks and desires . . . (Ps. 145 : 19). To this glory a man attains, surely not by any works of his, but by faith alone."¹⁶

Luther deals with the priesthood of believers principle, then, in terms of faith rather than love, because this principle indicates primarily what God does in making us believers, rather than what man does. This priesthood, indeed, becomes in those who receive it, a "right," but in a quite unusual sense. For "king" is the better word to emphasise the believer's *rights*,—and even these are construed as the power to undergo suffering victoriously; the word "priest" emphasises his privileged *responsibility*, toward God and hence toward all his neighbours, his divine calling into service rather than his human approach to God. "Priest" indicates the difference between interceding with God and cajoling God, and the difference between Christian love and even the most enlightened self-interest. It indicates the crucial connective between faith and the doctrine of Christian love, where we are told—astonishingly from one who had so high a Christology—that "each should become as it were a Christ to the other, that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all; that is, that we may be truly Christians."¹⁷ It indicates a crucial corrective to individualism, for this priesthood, in the first place, is no human performance, adding to or repeating Christ's sacrificial reconciling priesthood, but Christ's gift which he has obtained for us: Christ alone is the high priest;¹⁸ secondly, it pertains to the Church corporately, not to any individual privately; thirdly, it is used only in service for others, never for oneself.

The Church is a royal priesthood; priesthood applies to all its members in common. Does this mean that the Church has no special, clerical priesthood? Luther was challenged by Jerome Emser, who admitted that there was indeed a sense in which all Christians constituted a "spiritual priesthood," but argued that the New Testament also established a "consecrated priesthood."¹⁹ Luther had already set forth his positive position in 1520 before he wrote his long rebuttal against Emser. The Reformer asserted point-blank that the New Testament says not a word about a "spiritual estate" above the laity, marked with an "indelible character," equipped by divine right with power not only to dispense divine grace and offer expiatory sacrifices but also to rule the laity. Nevertheless, he insisted that an ordained ministry is necessary in the Church, not simply for human, sociological reasons but because it is an apostolic, Christ-established ministry. Here we come to grips with the problem of the authority of the Church, and authority within the Church.

THE NATURE AND ORDER OF THE MINISTRY

Is there a special priesthood within the Church? Yes, but it is derived from and responsible to the universal priesthood of believers.

Whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already consecrated priest, bishop and pope, though it is not seemly that every one should exercise the office. Nay, just because we are all in like manner priests, no one must put himself forward and undertake, without our consent and election, to do what is in the power of all of us. For what is common to all, no one dare take upon himself without the will and command of the community (Gemeinde); and should it happen that one chosen for such an office were deposed for malfeasance, he would then be just what he was before he held office. Therefore a priest in Christendom is nothing else than an office-holder. While he is in office, he has precedence; when deposed, he is a peasant or a townsman like the rest. Beyond all doubt, then, a priest is no longer a priest when he is deposed . . .

There is really no difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, "spirituals" and "temporals", as they call them, except that of office and works, but not of "estate"; for they are all of the same estate,—true priests, bishops and popes—though they are not all engaged in the same work, just as all priests and monks have not the same work. This is the teaching of St. Paul in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12 and of St. Peter in I Peter 2, as I have said above, viz., that we are all one body of Christ, the Head, all members one of another. Christ has not two different bodies, one "temporal", the other "spiritual." He is one Head, and He has one body.

Therefore, just as those who are now called "spiritual"—priests, bishops or popes—are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the Word of God and the sacraments, which is their work and office, so it is with the temporal authorities—they bear sword and rod with which to punish the evil and to protect the good.²⁰

To be more explicit about the nature of this office :

We are all priests, as many of us are Christians. But the priests, as we call them, are *ministers*, chosen from among us, who do all that they do in our name. And the priesthood is nothing but a ministry, as we learn from I Cor. 4 : 1, "Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God."²¹

Against Emser, Luther insisted :

The Holy Scriptures, particularly in the New Testament, where types are at an end, speak only of one, a *spiritual priesthood*, just as I said when discussing the papacy that the Scriptures speak only of one, a spiritual church. . . . And I hereby make this challenge: If Emser will bring forward a single letter of Scripture in which his churchy (Kirchisch) priesthood is called a priesthood, I will give in to him. But he will not take the challenge.

The Scriptures make us all priests alike, as I have said, but the churchy priesthood which is now universally distinguished from the laity and alone called a priesthood, in the Scriptures is called *ministerium, servitus, dispensatio, episcopatus, presbyterium, and at no place sacerdotium or spiritualis*. I must translate that. The Scriptures, I say, call the spiritual estate and priestly office a ministry, a service, an office, an eldership, a fostering, a guardianship, a preaching office, shepherds.²²

When Luther calls the ministry nothing but an "office," does he depreciate it? Does he ignore its unique holiness, and reduce the ministry to a purely utilitarian conception? No, decidedly not. This may be what we post-Enlightenment moderns see in the

expression, but it is not the conception of Luther, for whom the Church was a spiritual fellowship with Jesus Christ as its Head. When Luther suggested dropping the name "priest" for "those who are in charge of Word and sacrament among the people,"²³ he did so not because he wanted to eliminate the word from Christendom, but because he wanted to exalt it and protect it from sacerdotal misuse. Actually, "there is no greater name or honour before God and men than to be a priest."²⁴

When Luther said that, because the Christian community should not and cannot be without the Word of God, "it follows therefore logically that it must have teachers and preachers to administer this Word,"²⁵ he was not reducing the ministry to a rational postulate. The nature of the Christian ministry is determined by Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, and by the Word, the Gospel of redemption, which He has committed to it. The ministry (reverting to the traditional term, in 1530, Luther calls it the "spiritual estate"!)

has been established and instituted by God, not with gold or silver, but with the precious blood and the bitter death of His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. From His wounds flow the Sacraments . . . , and He earned it dearly that in the whole world men should have this office of preaching, baptizing, loosing, binding, giving the Sacrament, comforting, warning, exhorting with God's Word, and whatever else belongs to the pastoral office. This office not only helps to further and maintain this temporal life and all the worldly classes, but it also delivers from sin and death, which is its proper and chief work. Indeed, the world stands and abides only because of the spiritual estate; if it were not for this estate, it would long since have gone to destruction.²⁶

This is an office through which Christ does his work; it may even be said, the minister actually does Christ's work.

So many souls are daily taught by him, converted, baptized and brought to Christ and saved, redeemed from sins, death, hell, and the devil, and through him come to everlasting righteousness, to everlasting life and heaven. . . .

The minister does "great miracles," perhaps in a bodily way, but most certainly "spiritually in the soul, where the miracles are even greater."

Luther adds, significantly :

Not that he does this as a *man*! It is his *office*, ordained by God for this purpose, that does it, that and the *Word* of God which he teaches; *he is the instrument for this.*²⁷

This is to say that if one must distinguish between the person of the minister and the office of his ministry, so must one distinguish between the *office*, committed to the minister and the "success" of the minister's service. When Luther calls the clerical office a "service" or "ministry," he is thinking primarily of the objective rather than the subjective aspect. Ruben Josefson points out that

the human service and the divinely instituted office are not to be identified. In reaction to Roman sacerdotalism, Protestants have sometimes tried to protect the holiness of the ministerial office by basing it

on the pietistical idea that the priest's sacrifice is the offering of his own heart to God, and his primary function is to lead others into the kind of spiritual life he himself lives. The priest represents the congregation before God. By such reasoning he is easily made into a religious virtuoso, who, in what is almost a substitutionary way, offers his heart and soul to God. . . . It is in the sacrifice which God Himself makes that the ministry of the Christian Church finds, and must find, its basis. . . . In another context Luther says, "The office of preaching is a ministry which proceeds from Christ, not to Christ; and it comes to us, not from us." (W.A. 10 : 1 : 2, 122) . . . ²⁸

Thus, "the ministry has its foundation in God's redemptive work in Christ, and is, so to say, the fulcrum by which that work exercises its continuing effectiveness. The ministry as a God-given order is one of the church's constitutive factors."²⁹ This is the apostolicity of the Christian ministry. It is not simply a human contrivance to assure the continuity of the Church.

According to this sociological view, the office is secondary to the church; and the church is secondary to the faith and the persons sharing it. Such a concept cannot be harmonized with the theological view of the nature of the church, as it is found in Luther, for instance. "The office of the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments has been instituted that we may come to this faith," the Augsburg Confession says. That is in effect to say that the office is antecedent to the faith.³⁰

Now, since Christians are essentially and radically equal in dignity within the Church, there is no room for the notion that the clergy "rules" the laity (as rulership is usually understood), or that the clergy is necessarily graded internally for purposes of rule. Has Luther, then, as Roman Catholics and some Anglicans have supposed, abandoned the "apostolic," "three-fold" ministry? By what rules does one establish what is "apostolic,"—mark well, not in the sense of just anything that happened during apostolic times, but that which is necessary and constitutive in the abiding apostolic fellowship to which the apostolic faith was committed?

Luther insists that the apostolic ministry, according to the New Testament, is in essence *one order*, the priesthood which belongs equally and commonly to all believers, and which hence is assigned in a special way, for the sake of "decency and good order," I *Cor.* xiv. 40, to special "ministers chosen from among us, who do all that they do in our name."³¹ This is the "ministry of the Word and sacraments," or one may say more briefly, "ministry of the Word," not in the sense simply of custody of the Bible, but the office of "stewards of the mysteries of God."

Luther lists and expounds seven functions of a priest, i.e. of the corporate Christian priesthood: (1) to teach, to preach and

proclaim the Word of God, (2) to baptise, (3) to consecrate and administer the Eucharist, (4) to bind and loose sins (the Keys), (5) to pray for others (intercession), (6) to sacrifice (i.e. ourselves, *Rom. xii. 1, I Peter ii. 5*), and (7) to judge of all doctrine and spirits. . . .

But the first and foremost of all on which everything else depends, is the teaching (in such contexts this word for Luther is virtually interchangeable with preaching) of the Word of God. For we teach with the Word, we consecrate with the Word, we bind and absolve sins by the Word, we baptize with the Word, we sacrifice with the Word, we judge all things by the Word. Therefore when we grant the Word to anyone, we cannot deny anything to him pertaining to the exercise of his priesthood.³²

Luther objects that Roman Catholic ordination is not grounded on this constitutive factor, the proclamation of the Word; "not one" of the Roman Catholic priests preaches the Word "by virtue of his office, unless called to do so by another and a different call besides his sacramental ordination."³³

Because the Gospel of Jesus Christ is what it is, the ministry must be one order, and must belong to all Christians in common. Ordination is a "rite whereby one is called to the ministry of the Church."³⁴ "Ordination does not make a priest, but a servant of priests. . . .; . . . a servant and an officer of the common priesthood. . . .; . . . the representative of the whole Church."³⁵

Is the ministry therefore not a three-fold order? It may well be, according to very ancient custom, but one dare not call the three-fold distinction a necessity for the Church, so far as the New Testament is concerned. Luther is perfectly willing to recognise functional distinctions of rank such as bishop, and even pope, so long as it is admitted that our arrangement of these ranks is man-made, not a divine changeless ordinance.³⁶ He recognises that the terms deacon, presbyter, and bishop are Scriptural, though he insists that "presbyter" and "bishop" were originally interchangeable. He also acknowledges that the Church may arrange these ranks as it finds most useful, according to the twin principles of what "edifies (i.e. builds up) the Church," and "decency and good order" (i.e. taking care that the whole Church's will is heeded). But men's rules about clerical ranks dare not be proclaimed as divine necessity. Arrangements of men, however wise, however sensibly *erected upon God's commands are not* essentials of faith, commands of God. The Gospel itself shows that even the leaders among the redeemed dare not be placed beyond mutual criticism, for they too stand under judgment and in need of redemption. Here is an instructive case study for Luther's understanding of the authority of Scripture. Modern Biblical scholarship may not find Luther's New Testament exegesis in this case final by any means, but no stretch of the imagination makes the Roman Catholic—high Anglican exegesis more convincing; whereupon Luther's

criterion needs to be reiterated; if their hierarchical principles cannot be clearly established as commanded by the Word, we dare not allow them to be made an "article of faith," i.e. of the essence of the Church!

THE AUTHORITY OF THE MINISTRY

What kind of authority then does the ministry have? Luther can say that it is authority to *serve*, not to rule.³⁷ It is an *office*, not a privilege: "All their (the Romanists') boasts of an authority which dare not be opposed amount to nothing at all. No one in Christendom has authority to do injury, or to forbid the resisting of injury. There is no authority in the Church save for *edification*."³⁸ This edification is effected through, and under responsibility to, the Gospel: priests, bishops or popes "are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the Word of God and the sacraments, which is their work and office."³⁹ "If Christ Himself and all the apostles had no other power than to *help* souls, and have left behind them no other power in the Church," then tyranny in the Church must be resisted.⁴⁰

An insight into the nature and limits of the Church's authority is found in terms of the Keys, which "were not ordained for doctrine or government, but only for the binding and loosing of sin."⁴¹ This fact eliminates the pope's other "stolen" keys,—his "lock-picking tools,"⁴²—such as ruling power and legislative power.⁴³ The Keys for the binding and loosing of sin, as Luther expounds at length in a mature treatise, are God's keys; God's keys are not "different keys in heaven above from those we have below on earth." Yet "they are *heaven's keys* and not those of the earth. You shall have my keys (he says), and no others. And you shall have them here on earth."⁴⁴

On the other hand, when the whole Church commits responsibility—even limitedly—for these keys to its ministers, who will say that they have no authority? Theirs is a tremendous authority! We have quoted a few of Luther's countless words on the exalted nature of the ministerial calling. In a right Christian sense it is an authority "to govern and teach the people of Christ,"⁴⁵ a "right to rule over us,"⁴⁶ a "power" to administer Word and sacraments which "no individual may arrogate to himself, unless he be called."⁴⁷ But in all these quotations, which also could be multiplied, the accent is equally upon the reality of the divinely instituted authority and the necessity of protection against abuse—upon the minister's abiding responsibility to the whole body, whose "consent" to his authority is abidingly necessary. The "right and power" belong to the "Christian congregation" or community.

Ways must be found so that the wholeness of the Church may be effectively realised, and so that the whole Church may retain

its "right to judge" the public proclamation of the Gospel in and to the world, which is the Church's fundamental business. The Church may not permanently delegate this responsibility to any automatically guaranteed leadership, either in a Hobbesian or in some mystical fashion. "Bishops, popes, theologians, and everyone else "have the power to *teach*; but Christ "takes from the bishops, theologians and councils both the right and the power to *judge* doctrine," and commits them to the Christian community."⁴⁸ What this means is that even councils are not infallible or unlimited in authority; nevertheless, if they are true councils, they may be most useful in a faithful exercise of faith's responsibility. If papal pretensions for guaranteeing the presence and proper operation of the Church *ex opere operato* are short-circuitings of faith, "peeks into the back of one's arithmetic book for the right answers," so also may an Anglican "succession" or a comfortably vague appeal to "tradition," or a Lutheran "confession," or various kinds of Free Church "inspiration" or "freedom" come to circumvent the necessary venture of faith, and become an *ex opere operato* guarantee which can only be an idol set up in place of Christ.

A characteristic summary of the minister's authority and limit of authority is stated briefly in Luther's Large Catechism. Expounding (what for him is) the Fourth Commandment, "Honour thy father and thy mother," he speaks simply and movingly about the honour due to one's minister as one's "spiritual father."

THE APPOINTMENT OF THE MINISTRY

How shall the Church secure its ministers? It calls them out of its own numbers. How? In the early days of the Reformation Luther stated the principle :

A Christian not only has the *right and power* to teach God's Word, but is in *duty* bound to teach it on pain of losing his salvation and forfeiting God's favour.

Now you will say: "But, unless he has been called to do this, he dare not preach, as you yourself have repeatedly taught!" I reply: Here you must consider the Christian from a *double point* of view. On the one hand, when he is in a place where there are no Christians, he needs no other call than the fact that he is a Christian, inwardly called and anointed by God; he is bound by the *duty* of brotherly love to preach to the erring heathens or non-Christians and to teach them the Gospel, even though no one call him to this work. . . . (Stephen, Philip, and Apollos are cited.) . . . In such circumstances the Christian looks, in brotherly love, upon the needs of poor perishing souls, and waits for no commission or letter from pope or bishop. For necessity breaks every law and knows no law; moreover, love is bound to help when there is no one else to help. But on the other hand, when the Christian is in a place where there are Christians, who have the same power and right as he, he should not thrust himself forward, but should rather let himself be called and drawn forth to preach and teach in the stead and by the commission of the rest. Indeed, a Christian has such power that he may and should arise and teach, even among Christians, without being called of men, in case he finds the teacher in that place in error, provided

that this be done in a becoming and decent manner. . . . (I Cor. 14 : 30). . . . How much more does an entire Christian congregation have the right to call a man to this office whenever it becomes necessary! (I Cor. 14 : 39-40). Take this passage as a most sure basis, which gives more than sufficient authority to the Christian congregation to preach, to permit men to preach, and to call preachers. Especially in case of necessity, this passage calls every one in particular, without any call of men; so that we might have no doubt that the congregation which has the Gospel may and should choose and call, out of its number, one who is to teach the Word in its stead.⁴⁹

This right of the congregation Luther affirmed not only in the emergency where tyrannical bishops refused to commission a pastor; even where "the right sort of bishops" were in authority, they "could not and should not do this (i.e. appoint a pastor) without the consent, choice and call of the congregation; except in cases of necessity, in order that souls might not be lost for lack of God's Word."⁵⁰

THE RETREAT FROM THE THEORY

Unfortunately this position, though based upon some good principles, was both powerless to cope with the actual Church situation of the day, and ambiguous in its statement of Luther's thought. He found it necessary to reject Lambert's proposed territorial church order for Hesse based on this pure congregational polity, and as more and more Left-Wing Christians formed their own congregations he tried to clarify his thought on order, even at the price of becoming harsh, e.g. in the tract on *Infiltrating and Glandestine Preachers*, 1532.⁵¹

Luther was very much concerned about the oneness of the Church. John T. McNeill has gathered a great body of proof for this statement in his book, *Unitive Protestantism*. Here I shall refer only to the Large Catechism passage on the phrase of the Creed, "one holy Church," and the Preface to the Augsburg Confession. He thought hard and fought hard against the tendency to religious individualism or subjectivism. Part of the trouble in this situation was that Luther never successfully clarified the relation between *Gemeinde* as a single local congregation and *Gemeinde* as the one holy Christian community on earth.

Disheartening as the battle was against religious subjectivism, however, and much as Luther felt the necessity to retreat from the idealized congregational pattern he at first espoused, his basic principles of church order still give helpful guidance. Church orders are under the Gospel, and may not be hardened into autonomous systems. The Christian community as a whole must make the decisions how church order is to be organised and administered: the principle is "decency and good order." This is not only a right but a *duty* under God, for leadership must be provided for the Church even in emergencies.

Where Church authorities could not solve an emergency by themselves, Luther thought, "decency and good order" could best

be maintained if secular authorities took the initiative to rectify the situation. This was the point of Luther's appeal *To the Nobility*. In the terrible confusion of 16th century Germany the secular authorities thus became increasingly the executors of the common duty to provide leadership in the Church. But Luther never intended the development of the "State Church." His hope and ideal was rather a *Volkskirche*, a Church of the people. When he appealed to the princes and town councils to meet the Church emergency, at any rate, it was an appeal not to right but to responsibility.⁵² As "leading members of the Church," i.e. recognised leaders of the community, they were the persons who had power to lead in effective action without causing anarchy. "No one can do this (i.e. bring about a truly free council) so well as the temporal authorities, especially since now they also are fellow-Christians, fellow-priests, "fellow-spirituals," fellow-lords over all things, and whenever it is needful or profitable, they should give free course to the office and work in which God has put them above every man." The analogies Luther mentions in the same paragraph to support this idea are those of a fire devastating a city, and an enemy attack, indicating "the *duty* of every citizen to arouse and call the rest." Note, too that this paragraph is preceded by: "Every member is commanded to *care for* every other," and followed by: "There is no authority in the Church save for *edification*." If Luther's appeal to the authorities resulted in the "emergency bishop" conception and ultimately the State Church system, there remains at least in Luther's principle the basic correctives to that system, which have helped to sustain territorial Church Lutheranism in Germany, national Church Lutheranism in Scandinavia and the Baltic states, and Free Church Lutheranism in the western hemisphere and Australia and the "mission lands."

CONCLUSION

How shall we judge Luther's conception of the Church in terms of the priesthood of believers? Though giving Luther generous credit for heroic pioneering and profound insight, Bishop Newbigin submits that there are two basic weaknesses in the Protestant conception of the Church, and that Luther is responsible for them: (1) The content of "faith" became intellectualised; by an isolation of "Word and sacraments" from the continuing fellowship, doctrinal agreement became the one essential of the Christian Gospel and the unity of the Church. (2) The idea of the Church as a visible unity virtually disappeared, which inevitably led to impoverishment of the Christian fellowship. Newbigin criticises Barth's emphasis on "event" at the expense of continuity, and Schlink's effort to develop continuity in terms of "doctrine." Protestantism's "defect in the fundamental doctrine of the Church," the bishop says, lies in its persistence in emphasising the

Church defined simply as that which is constituted by the event of the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments, at the expense of the emphasis on the Church as a continuing historical society, constituted and sent forth once for all by Jesus Christ.

It may be replied that Newbigin's analysis might have been considerably different if he had not chosen his material from Luther's pioneering tracts, written when Luther was hardly past the threshold on his way into the Church struggle. Over against *Papacy at Rome* should have been set *On the Councils and Churches*, and over against the *Treatise concerning the Ban* should have been set *The Keys*. Particularly since the publication of Pauck's *Heritage of the Reformation*, 1950, with its superb essay on "Luther's Conception of the Church," not to mention the various writings of Gordon Rupp, Philip Watson, Thomas Torrance and Regin Prenter in this field, it is no longer excusable to say in English that Luther's doctrine of the Church tends to allow the Church as a visible unity to disappear. Pauck (who, by the way, does criticise Luther's tendency toward intellectualising the faith) ought to be required reading for any Anglo-Saxon who proposes to write something about Luther.

Next it may be urged that Luther's conception of the Church as a "spiritual assembly," a priesthood of believers, can be said to suffer from a fundamental defect only if (1) his conception does not also carry within itself the fundamental corrective for defects that may emerge, and (2) it does not protect against other serious defects found in other conceptions. I should want to maintain that Luther's conception of the creative Word contains the corrective for the admittedly prevalent "intellectualised Word." Bishop Heinrich Meyer of Luebeck, for example, reminds Lutherans that the Lutheran confessions claim to place Christ in their centre, therefore the confessions dare not place themselves at their centre without displacing Christ. Meanwhile, we may some day find that "doctrine" is not necessarily the equivalent of "intellectualised Word." I should want to maintain secondly that Luther's conception of the marks of the Church and the means of grace contain an effectual corrective for tendencies toward complacency with mere routine churchmanship or with a volatilised idea of Church unity. A recovery and development of Luther's dynamic understanding of "Spirit" would make possible a new breadth and profundity in Christendom's conception of the Church. Let one example suffice here : at the end of his treatment of the ministry as an "object of faith," Ruben Josefson insists :

Theological discussion of the ministry ought to concern itself with the ministry as it actually exists and manifestly carries on its work. How can it be said to be only an object of faith, when it occupies a manifest, visible

place in an institution in society? Against such an objection it is enough to reply that it is precisely about this actual, manifest and visibly functioning office that we have been speaking throughout. This is precisely the office which the evangelical concept couples with faith. The distinction visible-invisible is no more relevant here than the juxtaposition of subjective-objective or the distinction between outer and inner.⁶⁴

Luther left unsolved a whole series of fundamental problems concerning the Church. It may be asked, however, to what extent they have been fundamentally solved since his time! We still are concerned how to relate the eternal truth of the Gospel to the need for flexibility and freedom in the Church, on the one hand, and to the need for real unity in the Church, on the other; how to relate the free and sovereign Holy Spirit to the given means of grace and the definite marks of the Church; how to relate the local Christian community to the one holy community of the *Una Sancta*; how to develop a proper "theology concerning the laity" as well as a theology concerning the ministry—and beyond all this, how to put all these hard-won insights into practical effect!

I think it is fair to say, meanwhile, that Luther has made several seminal contributions of precious value to our Protestant heritage, which we need to recover and build upon. Luther's clarification of the relation of Christian responsibility and Christian freedom in the Church, in his insistence that if Jesus Christ is the sole Head of the Church, all human arrangements and actions must be provided with checks-and-balances, is a major contribution to the question of Church authority. Luther tried to steer a middle course to avoid both ecclesiastical tyranny and mere secularised rationalism or opportunism. The modern world owes an incalculable debt to Luther for his expounding of the realisation that no men, even the most powerful, even the most "religious," ought to be entrusted with unlimited, uncorrected authority. This is true not only in the ecclesiastical but also in the political realm. Niebuhr's dictum on democracy applies both in the political and the ecclesiastical realm: man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, man's tendency toward injustice makes democracy necessary. Luther's Christian anthropology, with which his priesthood of believers principle is closely related, was one of the ancestors of that insight, and to this day this principle helps to counteract the perversions of the non-Christian rationalism which is another of its ancestors. Luther's realisation that while Faith and Church Order are *both* divinely given, the arrangements Christians make of them are an ongoing, living challenge, and dare not be hardened into rigid forms, is still a major contribution to the question of Christian responsibility, both locally and globally. Luther's understanding of the position of the Christian laity as holding active responsibility in the Church; and his conception of the minister as a "spiritual father," not a sacerdotal authority on

the one hand, or a spiritual virtuoso or a mere nondescript chairman of a religious committee on the other—these views are still a major contribution to present problems of the active life of the Church. In all these contributions, Luther's conception of the priesthood of believers has played a fruitful part.

ROBERT H. FISCHER

NOTES

¹ Wilhelm Pauck's critical description, in his essay, "Luther's Conception of the Church," in *Heritage of the Reformation*, 1950, p. 153.

² "Address to the Nobility." *Works of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia Edition, II, 65. This work, like some of the following cited, is also to be found translated in Wace & Buchheim, *Primary Works of Martin Luther*, and B. L. Woolf, *Reformation Writings*, and is forthcoming in the large new American Edition of *Luther's Works*.

³ Phila. Ed., ii, 284.

⁴ *Papacy at Rome*, *ibid.*, i, 340.

⁵ Phila. Ed., i, 349.

⁶ *Ibid.*, i, 353.

⁷ *Babylonian Captivity*, ii, 278.

⁸ *Papacy at Rome*, i, 353, cf. 355f.

⁹ *Ibid.*, i, 350.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, i, 341, 340.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, i, 361. cf. 380.

¹² *Ibid.*, i, 351.

¹³ Newbiggin, *Household of God*, 1954, p. 55.

¹⁴ "Doctor Martin Luther's Answer to . . . Goat Emser of Leipzig, With a Glance at his Comrade Murner," 1521, Phila. Ed., iii, 394f.

¹⁵ *Address to the Nobility*, Phila. Ed., ii, 66.

¹⁶ *Christian Liberty*, Phila. Ed., ii, 232, 235.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ii, 338, cf. 337.

¹⁸ *Concerning the Ministry*, 1523, American Ed., xl, 14.

¹⁹ *Answer to Goat Emser*, Phila. Ed., iii, 319f.

²⁰ *Address to the Nobility*, ii, 68f.

²¹ *Babylonian Captivity*, on Ordination, ii, 279.

²² *Answer to Goat Emser*, iii, 321f.

²³ *Concerning the Ministry*, American Ed., xl, 35.

²⁴ *Commentary on Ps. 110*, 1535, American Edition, xiii, 294. The entire exposition (pp. 228-348) concerns the relation of Christ's high priesthood and the priesthood of the Church.

²⁵ *Light and Power of a Christian Congregation or Community to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers*, 1523, Phila. Ed., iv, 79.

²⁶ *Sermon on Keeping Children in School*, Phila. Ed., iv, 142f. Half of this treatise is devoted to the importance of maintaining the Church's ministry, including "pastors, teachers, preachers, lectors, priests (whom men call chaplains), sacristans, school-teachers, and whatever they work belongs to these offices and persons." (143).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, iv, 146.

²⁸ R. Josefson, "The Ministry as an Office in the Church." in Nygren, ed., *This is the Church*, 1952, pp. 273f. (transl. "En Bok om Kyrkan").

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

³¹ *Babylonian Captivity*, Phila. Ed., ii, 279; cf. *To the Nobility*, ii, 67f. and many places.

- ³² *Concerning the Ministry*, American Ed., 21ff. cf. 34f.
- ³³ *Babylonian Captivity*, Phila. Ed., ii, 280.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, ii, 283.
- ³⁵ *Answer to Goat Emser*, iii, 326f.
- ³⁶ On this paragraph see *Answer to Goat Emser*, iii, 322ff.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, iii, 326.
- ³⁸ *To the Nobility*, ii, 78.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, ii, 69.
- ⁴⁰ *Treatise concerning the Ban*, ii, 42.
- ⁴¹ *To the Nobility*, ii, 75, against the "second wall".
- ⁴² *On the Councils and the Churches*, 1539, v, 275.
- ⁴³ Extensively treated in *Papacy at Rome*, i, 376ff, *Concerning the Ministry*, American Edition, xl, 25ff, and *The Keys*, 1530, American Ed., xl, esp. 330ff.
- ⁴⁴ *The Keys*, American Ed., xl, 365. The entire treatise is important.
- ⁴⁵ *Christian Liberty*, Phila. Ed., ii, 346.
- ⁴⁶ *Babylonian Captivity*, ii, 279.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, ii, 283.
- ⁴⁸ *Right and Power of a Christian Congregation*, iv, 76f. This subject is treated in greater detail in Part II of *On the Councils and the Churches*, v, 178ff.
- ⁴⁹ *Right and Power of a Christian Congregation*, iv., 80f.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, iv, 82.
- ⁵¹ American Ed., xl, 383ff.
- ⁵² *Right and Power of a Christian Congregation*, Phila. Ed., iv, 84.
- ⁵³ *Address to the Nobility*, ii, 76-78.
- ⁵⁴ Josefson, "The Ministry as an Office in the Church," *op. cit.*, p. 280.