

PRIESTHOOD OF BELIEVERS IN LUTHER AND ADVENTISM

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Martin Luther's understanding of the priesthood of all believers is widely recognized by most Reformation scholars. Timothy George contends, "Luther's greatest contribution to Protestant ecclesiology was the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers."¹ Oswald Bayer notes in connection with one of Luther's publications that *The Address to the Christian Nobility* was "a document that had great effect, in the public realm as well, which one might call the Magna Carta for Luther's understanding of the priesthood of all believers."² At the same time this was not Luther's original contribution, even though he certainly placed great emphasis and his understanding came at a critical moment in the history of the Christian church. Tertullian, during the early church, presented baptism as the ordination to priesthood. He understood that, in baptism, believers "are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction."³ Luther, many centuries later, expressed the same thought when he wrote, "We are all priests, as many of us as are Christians."⁴ Thus, according to Robert Muthiah, the Reformation was a turning point in terms of this understanding of the priesthood of all believers.⁵ Such a shift in thinking, as part of the Reformation, is largely attributed to Luther. This chapter examines both Luther and Adventist reflections about this vital doctrine. The emphasis is on how Luther's understanding resonates or varies from that of Seventh-day Adventists.

¹ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformation* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2013), 97.

² Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 274.

³ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 7, in vol. 3 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951-6), 672.

⁴ LW 36:113; 44:127.

⁵ Robert Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009), 6.

1. Luther and the Priesthood of Believers

Luther discussed this topic throughout his literary works. As a consequence, there are many ways scholars have viewed this topic. Voss Hank proposed a chronological treatment. He suggested “a Roman Catholic period (1505-17); a period of strong emphasis (1518-23); a transitional period (1524-25); and a period of weaker emphasis (1526-46).”⁶ In the first stage, the Roman Catholic Church’s understanding of priesthood influenced Luther. During the second phase of development, his literary output was at its peak. He produced eleven of the fifteen works on the topic during this period. It is in these works that most of his thoughts on this subject are found. Luther’s focus on the transitional period is on Christian freedom and his polemic against Karlstadt was the intellectual driving force behind the peasant’s rebellion.⁷ According to Voss, the last twenty years of Luther’s *liewsefe* shows a decline in his emphasis upon the priesthood of all believers due to the fallout from the peasant’s war along with the growing influence of Anabaptist teaching. The doctrine, however, remained central in Luther’s ecclesiology. Three centuries after Luther, Adventism emerged during the 1830s as a lay-driven, trans-denominational, Scripture-focused movement. As the movement grew, it drew from both the Radical and Magisterial Reformations, a heritage that sought to conform everything with Scripture.

1.1. The Essence of Luther’s Teaching

Luther’s ideas on the priesthood of believers were formulated within the socio-religious and political context of his time. At that time, the major division within society concerned the difference between laity and clergy.⁸ His ecclesial world, according to Voss, “was divided into three estates: clerics, monastics, and laics.”⁹ On July 2, 1505, Luther became a monk and two years later, a priest in the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁰ Another important division that impacted society at that time was between the spir-

⁶ Hank Voss, *Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei: A Canonical, Catholic and Contextual Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 132.

⁷ Brett Muhlhan, *Being Shaped by Freedom: An Examination of Luther’s Development of Christian Liberty, 1520-1525* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick), viii.

⁸ Voss, *Priesthood of All Believers*, 131.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

itual and secular. Based on biblical grounds, Luther rejected these divisions. His rejection of these divisions may be observed in a number of his literary works. Voss highlights two such works that provide the clearest evidence: “*On Monastic Vows* (1521) and his vigorous debate with Jerome Esmer (d. 1521) over ‘priesthood’ in 1 Peter 2:5, 9.”¹¹ In these works, Luther argues against the spiritual/secular divide; the lay/clergy division is also rejected. Luther believed that the priesthood of all Christians flows from the priesthood of Christ.¹² He argued that “as Christ’s brothers, Christians receive a share in his priestly office, namely through baptism, regeneration and anointing with the Holy Spirit.”¹³ It is, however, important to note that Luther’s position on the division between laity and clergy did not rule out church office.¹⁴ Therefore, he did not reject the ministry as a special calling and function. The public character of the ministerial office is the main difference that sets it apart from the priesthood of all believers.

1.2. The Function of Priesthood

In the treatise *On Appointing Ministers of the Church*, Luther lists seven functions of the priesthood: teaching or preaching, baptism, consecration or the administration of the Lord’s Supper, binding and loosing sins, intercession, sacrifices, and the judging of doctrines. A number of scholars discuss these functions with reference to both ministers and laity. Brian Gerrish observes that Luther “assigns to the royal priesthood all the functions that, in other places, are assigned to the church’s official ministry.”¹⁵ Michael Parsons interprets Luther to be saying that “all Christians are permitted to perform the same functions.”¹⁶ For Gerrish, Luther simply demonstrates that the function belongs to the whole priesthood and every member.¹⁷

¹¹ Ibid., 131.

¹² Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1970), 314.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Muthiah, *Priesthood of All Believers*, 19.

¹⁵ Brian Gerrish, *The Old Protestant and New* (New York: T&T, 1982) 97, 98.

¹⁶ Michael Parsons, *Aspects of Reforming: Theology and Practice in Sixteenth Century Europe* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2013).

¹⁷ Gerrish, *Old Protestant and New*, 98.

2. Luther's Biblical Foundation for the Priesthood of All Believers

2.1. Old Testament

Prominent texts used by scholars about the priesthood of all believers include Exod 19:5–6. Luther, however, does not engage this passage in his major arguments. Instead, he opts for the NT passage based upon the LXX. He notes some echoes and allusions to the priesthood of believers across the OT. For example, he applies ecclesiological language to Cain and Adam when he states: "But the words which Cain adds—'I shall be hidden from your face'—deal with an ecclesiastical punishment and with true excommunication. Since Adam was in possession of the priesthood and of royal rule, and Cain is excommunicated by Adam because of his sin, he is at the same time deprived of the glory of the priesthood and of royal rule."¹⁸ He summarizes the loss Cain sustained this way: "He [Cain] is compelled to leave not only the common home, dear parents, and the protection of parents but also his hereditary birthright, the prerogative of rule and priesthood, and the fellowship of the church."¹⁹ Luther's understanding about the origin of the priesthood and his treatment of the subject in the OT seems to be individualistic rather than corporate. He concludes, "Therefore the true priesthood was in existence from the very beginning of the world, first covertly but later on promised more clearly to Abraham."²⁰ Luther recognized the Levites had a special priesthood. They were "appointed by God as priests; but they were mortal, and therefore they gave a blessing that was only temporal. For as the priest, so the blessing. They could not do away with sin and death; nor could they purify hearts."²¹ The approach that Luther uses to draw attention to the echoes of priesthood in the OT presents some challenges. There is no mention of priesthood in the texts that he picks in Genesis. This may be viewed as eisegesis; however, Luther also uses a typological method to relate this to the church. While this may be appreciated, it raises more questions as to whether typology was indeed intended in those passages. The best way is to make a judgment based upon the tools available to him at that time.

¹⁸ LW 1:299.

¹⁹ LW 1:308.

²⁰ LW 4:177.

²¹ Ibid.

2.2. New Testament

In his argument against Jerome Emser,²² Luther draws upon biblical evidence in the NT.²³ In Luther's own words, the Scripture is the primary foundation of his argument on the priesthood of believers. He states:

For it stands in Scripture ... but you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood.... Tell me, can anyone be so crude as not to understand what St. Peter speaks here? Or do the passages from the fathers have to step forward here and provide the interpretation? He [Peter] names the people and the congregation very clearly; and he calls them all together a royal priesthood.²⁴

This appeal represents Luther's approach throughout his writings in support of his argument for the priesthood of believers. This passage also is part of the debate Luther had with Emser, who represented the Roman Catholic Church. Emser wrote a treatise against Luther's position and Luther responded: "He may interpret 'priests' as he pleases, but all Christians are nevertheless such priests through this passage. If all of us should preach, then the tonsure-bearers (what he chose to call the Roman Catholic priests) must keep silent, since they have a different, special priesthood above all Christians."²⁵ In the course of the debate, Luther used several NT passages, including 1 Pet 2:9, Rev 5:9–10, and 20:6. He concludes,

Thereby the Holy Spirit teaches us that the ointments, consecrations, tonsures, chasubles, albs, chalices, masses, sermons etc. do not make priests or give power. Rather, priesthood and power have to be there first brought from baptism and common to all Christians through the faith which builds them upon Christ the true high priest.²⁶

²² Some background information about Emser, Luther's opponent, is important: "Jerome Emser (1477-1527) the goat of Liepzig – Luther's designation because Emser's coat of arms, a shield and helmet adorned with a goat, was displayed on the title page of his writings, had pursued a variegated career before engaging Luther in a bitter literary feud. After studying law and theology at the university of Tübingen and Basel, he became secretary to Cardinal Raymond von Gurk, papal legate in the matter of indulgences until 1505" (LW 39:107).

²³ Michael Sokupa, "Martin Luther on the Priesthood of all Believers," (MTh Thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2004).

²⁴ LW 39:236. All Luther's direct quotations are taken from the following edition: Eric W. Gritsch, Helmut T. Lehmann eds, *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1970).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ LW 39:236, 237.

Luther always buttressed his argument, including this one with Esmer, based upon Scriptural evidence.

3. Luther, Adventism, and the Priesthood of Believers

In this chapter, I have summarized the essence of Luther's views on the priesthood of believers into two areas: biblical and ecclesiological. These two areas form the basis for engaging Luther's doctrine from an Adventist perspective. While separated by centuries, a comparison of key points is helpful to understand the connection that Adventism has to Luther. This can be seen especially in a recent dialogue between Lutherans and Seventh-day Adventists.

The Lutheran World Church Federation engaged in a consultation meeting with Seventh-day Adventist leaders between 1994 and 1998. Lutheran and Adventist representatives shared their theological perspectives. Out of the ten points, the fifth point reads: "Stressing the priesthood of all baptized believers to indicate the equality of all Christians before God and the apostolic obligation of the whole Christian community."²⁷ The consultation meeting held on November 1–5, 1994 revealed that both Adventists and Lutherans understood the church as a community of believers. There was also a strong appreciation for the work of Luther among Adventist theologians.²⁸

The priesthood of believers is a scriptural teaching that lies at the heart of the Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. Adventist theologians and historians have highlighted the importance of this concept. According to Norskov Olsen, "The Lutheran Reformation grew out of Luther's own religious experience in which he found justification by 'faith alone' and 'grace alone' through 'Christ alone' and 'the Bible alone.'"²⁹ Among other things, the emphasis is on *sola scriptura* as reflected in Luther's teaching of the priesthood of believers. Olsen summarizes Luther's ecclesiology: "From this experience stems his ecclesiology: negatively as a reaction against sacerdotalism and positively in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers."³⁰ Reflecting on Luther's teaching in general, Rex Edwards mentions

²⁷ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and The Lutheran World Federation, *Lutherans and Adventists in Conversation* (GC and LWF, 2000), 75.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁹ Norskov V. Olsen, *Myth and Truth: Church, Priesthood and Ordination* (Riverside, CA: Loma Linda University Press, 1990), 105.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

three principles: “the supremacy of Scripture over tradition, the supremacy of faith over works, and the supremacy of the Christian people over an exclusive priesthood.”³¹

In demonstrating how Scripture plays a foundational role for his teaching on the priesthood of believers, Luther boldly stated, “Therefore, when we grant the Word to anyone we cannot deny anything to him pertaining to the exercise of his priesthood.”³² Luther’s ideas on the priesthood of believers

signaled a revolution in the concept of the church. In place of a hierarchical and stratified ecclesiastical structure, Luther proposed a model based on the equality of all members under the head, Christ. He replaced the rule of the oligarchical few and the rule of the democratic many, with the rule of the eternal Son of God who was active in all true members.³³

Such reflections demonstrate that the priesthood of believers played a central role for both Luther and his descendants and remains an important part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Adventists view a strong consistency between *sola scriptura* and the priesthood of all believers.

4. Conclusion

This chapter hopefully stimulates further discussion on the connections between Luther and Adventism on the subject of the priesthood of believers. We need to reflect upon Luther’s understanding and the continued legacy of this concept. Luther must be understood on his own terms. He believed that every doctrine should be based upon Scripture. Such an approach must begin with Scripture as its foundation. The application of the doctrine should also find relevance and application for the church today. Luther balanced these two principles in his approach as he addressed relevant issues in his time.

³¹ Rex Edwards, “Priesthood of Believers,” www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org, 12.

³² *Ibid.*, 13 (See *LW* 40:21).

³³ *Ibid.*, 17, 18.