

Dispelling the Myth of Martin Luther's Priesthood of all Believers

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ABSTRACT

While protestant churches see the priesthood of all believers mantra as a badge of honour, they all have senior church leaders set aside as ordained, commissioned or called leaders. About one hundred years after the reformation, Baptist leaders including John Smyth and Thomas Helwys quit the Church of England and started their own nascent Baptist Church because they agreed with Luther's teaching of priesthood of all believers. Both Smyth and Helwys taught that all Christians were priests with direct access to God. The second London Confession of 1677 affirmed that all members were bound to further the good of the church by exercising their gifts to promote communion, love, and edification in the community of faith. The US Baptists hold to the same principles expressed in the London Confession, a position they adopted in 1925. Southern Baptists also opted for a similar concept in 1925 as expressed in the Baptist Faith Message. As much as there may be all these interpretations and beliefs on priesthood, there seems to be inadequate literature on priesthood across all the churches. This paper hence reviews what priesthood of all believers meant to Luther and what it may mean to different protestant churches today. This paper reviews the historical meaning of this term and how it compares to the Roman Catholic Church's universal priesthood, analyze the historical background of the doctrine, its New Testament implications as well as modern-day applications. The review concluded that Martin Luther got it right in the doctrine of priesthood of all believers since he rebelled against what he considered clerical excesses in the echelons of the Roman Catholic Church. The paper thus recommends that the protestant churches must neither sleep nor slumber in order to safeguard the hard-earned reformation fruits.

Keyword: *Priesthood and believers, universal priesthood, Martin Luther priesthood, protestant reformation, Roman Catholic reformation.*

INTRODUCTION

The reclaiming of the doctrine of priesthood of all believers can be described as the battle cry of the German Reformer, Dr. Martin Luther (1483-1546). While this concept may mean different things to different people, its significance for the protestant Church in general and to Luther, in particular, cannot be overlooked. Luther himself stressed the discovery influenced his life and his understanding of the Scripture (Luther, 2019).

Luther disliked the often-lofty privileges donned by some Roman Catholic clergy and how the common man was perceived by the powerful and the privileged elites of the priestly class. The

immense authority the clergy exercised over the lay Christians did not please Luther who was himself a Roman Catholic priest before he revolted and was excommunicated. Luther objected to the clergy-laity distinction that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lord, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate (Luther, 2013).

There was an important question on what the priesthood of all believers meant to Luther. Specifically, Luther's claim on priest hood for all believers challenged how the Roman Catholic leadership understood this doctrine back then and whether it was a new concept that he had discovered or if it was common knowledge in the Church at the time (Latourette, 1953). The controversy goes further in Luther's claim that all believers were priests who could directly approach the Lord for forgiveness and serve Him, among other things.

The concept of the priesthood of all believers according to Luther's claim could possibly endanger the age-old Catholic Church practice of confessing sins to priests. Its scriptural basis was questionable. To exemplify this, we refer to the Arabic proverb which articulates if everyone is a prince, who then rides the donkey. According to Luther, the priesthood of all believers' doctrine could be the beginning of an ecclesiastical anarchy. If every Christian is a priest, then no one is, appears to be a common-sense conclusion. Plass (2006) highlights what a view that Luther expresses which is considered very radical. Specifically, Luther's view postulates that none of us is born an apostle, preacher, teacher, pastor; but that all of us are born solely priests. Then we take some from among these born priests and call and elect them to these offices that they may discharge the duties of the office in the name of all of us.

In this paper, the writer will examine and explore the historical background of this teaching, its meaning and its relevance today. Relevant scriptures from the New Testament will be exegeted to shed light on this historical subject. The ecclesial significance of this credo will also be collaborated. The understanding of the protestant Church as well as that of the Roman Catholic Church will be scrutinized. The following objectives therefore guided this review: definition and historical background and New Testament analysis.

Definition and Historical Background

The priesthood of all believers, as promoted by Luther, took the Church by storm right after its formulation. However, Luther never used an exact phrase for priesthood of all believers or universal priesthood but this doctrine permeates Luther's 1520 tract to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation (Lang, 2015). In this tract, Luther vehemently opposes the then prevailing view that Christians were divided into two distinct camps: spiritual and secular. Luther put forth his revolutionary doctrine that all baptized disciples of Christ were indeed priests and also spiritual according to the Scripture. This view was seen by the Roman Catholic Church as a dodgy view because Luther was in a confrontation with the leadership of the Church and some of its age-old doctrines.

The historical context of the rise of this concept is related to Luther's disillusionment with the many ecclesiastical cases he perceived as abuse in the Roman Catholic Church like the sale of indulgences and the exaggeration of their benefits. He also said the papacy had distorted the sacraments with its own traditions and policies, transforming them into a system of control and coercion. Catholic University of America Press (2002) reflects upon the infamous pronouncement traditionally attributed to the Dominican friar, Johann Tetzel that as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul springs from purgatory (Sobald der Pfennig im Kasten klingt, die Seele aus dem Fegfeuer springt). One of Luther's famous 95 theses states that Christians should be taught that those who give to the poor, or lend to the needy, do better than buying indulgence (Wengert, 2002). This deduction forms another example of how disappointed Luther was with an ecclesiastical system he considered compromised.

Luther came to believe that every Christian could have an audience with God with no intermediaries like priests; Christians confessing their sins only to priests and enumerating all the sins they may have committed seemed to Luther a religious innovation harmful to the community of faith. In response to the elevated significance of the priest, Wengert (2002) noted that a priest in Christendom is nothing else but an officeholder. One difference is that should the priest either resign his responsibilities or perform poorly, he can be removed and join the lay congregation again, since there is no indelible mark as priest and that his call comes from the congregation.

Luther never rejected the idea of confession. He encouraged Christians to confess their sins to one another (Luther, 2013). He also considered the verbal affirmation that a pastor or a confessor gives to a penitent Christian that his sins were forgiven as affirming what God has already done for the one who confessed and whose sins God forgave (Strauch, 2003). Thus, Luther taught that Christ forgives us when we pray to Him for forgiveness. Another of his 95 theses states that every Christian who feels sincere repentance and woe on account of their sins has perfect remission of pain and guilt even without letters of indulgence (Wengert, 2002). Apparently, what Luther rejected is misuse of indulgences and he was fine with a godly confessor absolving and forgiving the sins of the Christian penitent.

Luther taught that Christians should confess their sins to one another and that no priest was needed for this but only a confessor who could be a cleric or lay (Lohse, 1999). Modern day Lutheranism does not see the traditional Lutheran confession rite as a vital exercise. One small exception is the Lutheran high church which maintains traits of confession rite. Most people who are apt to embrace this ritual are the Christians from Roman Catholic and Episcopal backgrounds. In the Book of Hebrews, as understood by Luther, there is a teaching on the Old Testament system of priesthood as not being compatible with the New Covenant. In other words, all Christians are priests with full direct access to God. While Luther himself did not systematically write about what he meant on the concept of priesthood of all believers the little he wrote about this subject can be insightful.

Luther taught that public preaching and the sacraments should be handled through the office of ministry for the sake of order (Lohse, 1999). Apparently, Luther feared anarchy and heresy if the untrained Christians conducted these ministries. So, Luther did believe in ordained, called or commissioned ministers. The importance of this doctrine can be seen largely by taking a deep look at the historical context of the priesthood of all believers. Before the reformation, the Roman Catholic Church had in place a complex system of a priesthood mechanism that subordinated the common Christian and elevated the clergy in ecclesiastical matters. In reaction to this perceived subjugation of the laity, Luther and his fellow reformers challenged the Roman Catholic Church system and insisted that every Christian was a priest. Luther believed the biblical teaching of priesthood of all believers has been compromised in the hierarchical priestly system the Roman Catholic Church put in place. Armed with this new knowledge, Luther demanded that the doctrine of priesthood of all believers be given its rightful biblical place.

Though the Roman Catholic Church has its own form of priesthood of all believers called universal priesthood, it was unprepared to slim down the system to implement this doctrine in a tangible manner. Luther was also unable to give the priesthood of all believers creed a long lasting practical meaning. Thus, while this doctrine sounds good, it had no concrete effect on the post-reformation Church. To this day, though this concept is flaunted around like a magic mantra, the protestant Church is essentially puzzled about it. One thing the protestant Church got it right, by learning from the early reformers, is that the line between the clergy and laity is a thin one unlike the Roman Catholic Church that has a more pronounced dichotomy between the two.

The prominent North African Church father, Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, popularly known as Tertullian recognized early on the veracity of the doctrine of priesthood of all believers. He was not the only early church father to come to that conclusion. However as Lohse (1999) notes, he was the first to use some of the key themes and phraseology on spiritual priesthood as the ability for laypeople to perform baptisms in the absence of a priest, and that ordination and succession from the apostles was not regarded as the authority of a true priest. Clement of Rome and Clement of Alexandria, reached the same conclusion after studying the NT. In conclusion, their conviction was that all Christians belonged to the priesthood (Lindsey, 1903).

New Testament Analysis

The fact that Luther was considered a renegade former priest by the Roman Catholic Church complicated matters. It seems that the Roman Catholic Church harbored rancor towards Luther and anything he said about the Faith was seen as a suspect. Is there any difference between the protestant term, “priesthood of all believers” and the Roman Catholic Church term, “universal priesthood? Could this be simply hair-splitting or is there a meaning behind the wording?

The Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox, the high Church Angelical Christians believe that all Christians are meant to be disciples. However, in all these churches, only the ordained or commissioned clergy is authorized to handle the liturgy and the sacraments (Cross

and Livingstone, 2005). This is the same position that Luther propagated. The biblical passages that teach about kingdom of priests, royal priesthood, depending on the translation, are deeply cherished by the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants do not have a monopoly on these verses as they subscribe to the teachings found in 1 Peter 2:9 which states that all are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called people out of darkness into his wonderful light.

The Roman Catholic Church has long taught that all believers are priests called by God to evangelize. Many Roman Catholic Church councils and leaders including popes have elaborated the doctrine that all disciples of Christ, ordinary Christians, are a part and a parcel of the common priesthood. Therefore, since the Second Vatican Council of Bishops, the laity in the Roman Catholic Church has been recognized as leaders in so many aspects of the life of the church (Cahoy, 2012). However, while cherishing the doctrine of universal priesthood, the Roman Catholic Church teaches a special office of priesthood that minister to the community of faith. This office is identical to Luther's ministry office as seen in his sermon on the *Magnificat* (Luther, 2013). In this Roman Catholic Church understanding, there are a universal priesthood and a non-universal priesthood.

Since all protestant churches have elders or other recognized leaders to serve congregations, there is a begging question as to why it is this different from the Roman Catholic Church which has priests. The word for elder in Greek is *presbutero*. This very word is presbyter and priest in English. Hence, the Roman Catholic Church has elders but they call them priests. Luther wrote that this word priest should become as common as the word Christian since all Christians are priests (Luther, 2016).

On the issue of confessions, the New Covenant teaches that Jesus said that as the Father had sent he, he was sending us and asks us to receive the Holy Spirit so If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. First, Jesus gave his disciples the power to forgive sins and the power not to forgive sins. This power does not come from the disciples but from their Lord, Jesus Christ. Some protestants may exclaim, Heresy, only God has the power to forgive sins and no one else. Ironically enough, the Pharisees and the scribes were offended when they saw Jesus forgiving a sinner. The instructions of Jesus are authoritative. He did not say, confirm to those who are forgiven by God that that their sins are indeed forgiven. He gave the disciples the power to forgive sins. This seems too much authority in the hands of mere human beings but it is not that much compared to the power the Lord gave to his disciples to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy and to drive out demons as chronicled in the New Testament. Christians are therefore vehicles God uses to deliver His forgiveness.

Luther's interpretation of John 20: 21-23 is different from that of the Roman Catholic Church. For Luther and other first-generation Reformers, there is no distinction between the people of God and laity (Moltman, 1977). However, after few generations, the Lutherans' understanding evolved from the efficacy of God's work to the fervent devotion or the effort of the penitent (Stoeffler, 1971). Regardless of how much emphasis the Roman Catholic Church puts on, there

is no doubt that this Church recognizes the following three offices: Universal priesthood in the New Testament allowed the ordaining of priests set aside for the ministry.

First of all, the Roman Catholic Church having many priests is not a case against them. Many protestant denominations have many priests as well. What we can learn from this compelling passage is that Christ's priesthood is superior to that of the Old Covenant. The Roman Catholic priesthood is not condemned here. Further, we learn that setting aside some Christians as ordained priests is not a threat to the office of Jesus Christ as our High Priest. The New Covenant priests serve under the authority of Jesus Christ, the only eternal High Priest.

CONCLUSION

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers affirms that all Christians have equal access to God through Jesus Christ; this sole High Priest and Mediator connects fallible believers to the infallible God. This open access to God makes all disciples of Christ equal since there is no need for a priestly mediator. The sacramental and sacerdotal implications of this doctrine have not diminished since its precise formulation in the 16th century. The affirmation that all Christians have direct access to God through one Mediator, the Messiah, also had a substantial societal impact on the traditional laity and clergy relationship; the priests had to contend with diminished privileges as the laity amassed more authority and activity in their ecclesiastical engagements. While the priesthood of all believers credo is one of the central doctrines of the protestant reformation, it does not threaten the vital role of mature and trained clergy to shepherd the church alongside the laity.

Martin Luther got it right the doctrine he is best known for, the priesthood of all believers. Luther rebelled against what he considered clerical excesses in the echelons of the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church underestimated the impact of the dissatisfaction that was brewing in the clergy and the laity, the commoners and the nobility. The Roman Catholic Church, which resembled a sleeping giant, woke up from its slumber to silence the dissenters, a tactic that worked for it before; but things were different this time. When the Roman Catholic Church realized the enormity of the challenges it was facing, it embraced an internal reformation to put its house in order. The Roman Catholic Church reformation fixed some of the ills but there was still much work to be done.

The fruit of the protestant movement, the priesthood of all believers, invigorated dissenting Christian communities and the protestant church was born; for example, Jurgen Moltman, in explaining the doctrine of priesthood of all believers, asserts that Baptized believers have been called by the Lord to serve him and bear him witness. The doctrine of priesthood of all believers is as biblical as the Lord's Table. Today, many churches in the protestant tradition flaunt this doctrine, others cherish it but more humbly.

Martin Luther's reformation and his emphasis on priesthood of all believers was not a onetime flick to revitalize the church but an ongoing effort by the community of faith to always stay true

to the teachings of the New Covenant. The protestant church is not immune to the challenges that the pre-reformation Roman Catholic Church faced. The protestant church must, therefore, neither sleep nor slumber in order to safeguard the hard-earned reformation fruits.

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