
The priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of all believers in the theology of Martin Luther

ADRIANI MILLI RODRIGUES¹

The priesthood of all believers is one the most important ideas in the theology of Martin Luther and has significant implications for ecclesiology, theology of ministry and biblical interpretation, all of them with an impact on the notion of religious authority. Given the importance of all these themes, this article aims at investigating the proper understanding of the foundations of Luther's thinking on the topic as well as the consistency of this Protestant concept of priesthood and its implications. That will be done by describing the concept of Christ's priesthood in the context of the theology of Martin Luther, observing how this concept influences Luther's understanding of the priesthood of all believers.

Keywords: Priesthood of all believers; Martin Luther; Ecclesiology; Religious authority.

O sacerdócio de todos os crentes representa um dos conceitos mais importantes na teologia de Martinho Lutero e possui implicações significativas para a eclesiologia, teologia do ministério e a interpretação bíblica — temas que afetam a noção de autoridade religiosa. Dada a importância de todos esses assuntos, este artigo tem como objetivo investigar a adequada compreensão dos fundamentos do pensamento de Lutero sobre o sacerdócio de todos os crentes, bem como a consistência deste conceito protestante e suas implicações. Isso será realizado por meio da descrição do conceito do sacerdócio de Cristo no contexto da teologia

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¹ Professor de Teologia no Centro Universitário Adventista de São Paulo. Doutorando (PhD candidate) em Teologia Sistemática na Andrews University (EUA), com semestre sanduíche (Doctoral Research Scholars Program) em Princeton. Pesquisador visitante na Universidade de Notre Dame (EUA). Mestre em Ciências da Religião pela UMESP. Membro por excelência acadêmica da Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi (EUA). E-mail: adriani.milli@unaspedu.br.

de Martinho Lutero, observando como esse conceito influencia a compreensão de Lutero sobre o sacerdócio de todos os crentes.

Palavras-chave: Sacerdócio de todos os crentes; Martinho Lutero; Eclesiologia; Autoridade religiosa.

The priesthood of all believers is one the most important ideas in the theology of Martin Luther.² This idea has been widely discussed in Protestant circles (see MONTOVER, 2011; NAGEL, 1997; ROGERS, 2010; Mayes 1996; MONTOVER, 2008; EASTWOOD, 2009),³ since it has significant implications for ecclesiology (see KÄRKKÄINEN, 2002, p. 42-44),⁴ including the theology of ministry (see PREUS, 1979; WRIEDT, 2002; JEFFCOAT JÚNIOR, 1989; WEE, 1990) and biblical interpretation.⁵ All these implications are related to the notion of religious authority. In other words, the idea of the priesthood of all believers influences the understanding of the authority of the church, the authority of the ministry, and the authority of biblical interpreters (see CARROLL, 1991, p. 30; CULP, 2010, p. 43;

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² According to Mark Tranvik (2004, p. 37), the center of “Luther’s theological revolution” is the notion of “justification by faith, and its corollary” is the “priesthood of all believers”.

³ As Brian Gerrish (1965, p. 404) points out, “at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 Philip Melancthon advised against discussion of the priesthood of all believers, relegating it to the ‘odious and unessential articles which are commonly debated in the schools.’ In the Augsburg Confession, which had already been finished and read when he gave this judgment, the doctrine is passed over in silence. But Protestant tradition has not followed Melancthon in this respect. The priesthood of all believers has come to be regarded, along with Biblical authority and salvation by faith, as one of the three main points of evangelical theology”.

⁴ Timothy George (1988, p. 95) argues that “Luther’s greatest contribution to Protestant ecclesiology was his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.” In fact, Marks Wriedt (2003, p. 99) connects Luther’s notion of the priesthood of all believers with his ecclesiological reflection. In his words, “Luther’s characteristic and mature statements of the priesthood of all believers, which turn the hierarchy of the church upside down and plant a biblical theological foundation, can only be found in his later ecclesiology after he had been provoked by the failed talks with Rome and his order to think his alternative approach through to the end”.

⁵ For Alister McGrath (2007, p. 53), “on the basis of this doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers, Luther insisted that every Christian has the right to interpret the Bible and to raise concerns about any aspect of the church’s teaching or practice that appears to be inconsistent with the Bible. There is no ‘spiritual’ authority, distinct from or superior to ordinary Christians, who can impose certain readings of the Bible upon the church”.



GRUDEM, 2000, p. 933).⁶ Despite their different nuances, these three aspects seem to indicate that the concept of the priesthood of all believers undermines the Catholic understanding of religious authority, which is essentially based on the hierarchical structure of the ordained ministry.⁷

However, while the discussion of the implications of the priesthood of all believers is helpful, it should not replace the study of its theological foundations. As a matter of fact, a proper understanding of such foundations is essential for the consistency of this Protestant concept of priesthood and its implications. For instance, writing from a Catholic perspective, Gerald O'Collins and Michael Jones affirm the importance of the priesthood of all believers without necessarily agreeing with the Protestant view of religious authority. It means that these Catholic scholars defend both the priesthood of all believers and the hierarchical notion of religious authority.

In fact, O'Collins and Jones correctly point out the importance of the study of the theological foundation for the notion of the priesthood of all believers. In their words, by virtue of their baptism all Christians share in the priesthood of Christ. But does this participation differ from the participation in the priesthood of Christ received through ministerial ordination, so that—for instance—only a validly ordained priest can bring into being the sacrament of the Eucharist? Does ministerial ordination effect such an essential difference? [In this context, they argue that] any

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⁶ McGrath (2007, p. 3) argues that “Luther’s radical doctrine of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ empowered individual believers. It was a radical, dangerous idea that bypassed the idea that a centralized authority had the right to interpret the Bible. There was no centralized authority, no clerical monopoly on biblical interpretation”.

⁷ The Catholic conception of religious authority is particularly evident in its notion of hierarchical constitution of the church and the sacrament of holy orders (see OTT, 1974, p. 276-291, 450-459).



adequate response to these questions depends on a theological understanding of the priesthood of Christ himself (O'COLLINS; JONES, 2010, p. v).⁸

The disagreement between the Catholic and the Protestant conception of the priesthood of all believers reveals the importance of the study of the priesthood of Christ as the theological foundation for a proper understanding of the priesthood of all believers and its implications for the notion of religious authority. Considering that the concept of priesthood of all believers is primarily associated with Martin Luther, due to the fact that this concept is highly emphasized in his theology, some questions may be raised about the theological foundation of Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers: How does Luther understand the priesthood of Christ? How does his understanding of Christ's priesthood influence his concept of the priesthood of all believers? Does Luther's conception of Christ's priesthood prevent the Catholic idea of a twofold participation in the priesthood of Christ? In light of these questions, the purpose of the present article is to describe the concept of Christ's priesthood in the context of the theology of Martin Luther, observing how this concept influences Luther's understanding of the priesthood of all believers.

To achieve this purpose, I will initially describe the concept of the priesthood of Christ in the theology of Luther. Then, I will depict Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers, observing particularly how this notion is influenced by Luther's concept of Christ's priesthood. Taking into account the large amount of Luther's writings, the proposed presentation and analysis of the priesthood of Christ in Luther's theology will not be exhaustive. Furthermore, even though this study emphasizes the connection

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⁸ Certainly, they maintain a distinction between two types of participation in the priesthood of Christ, namely, the participation of the whole community of believers and the participation of the ministerial priesthood. This distinction is clearly presented in the Catholic Catechism. "Christ, high priest and unique mediator, has made of the Church 'a kingdom, priests for his God and Father.' The whole community of believers is, as such, priestly. The faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood through their participation, each according to his own vocation, in Christ's mission as priest, prophet, and king. Through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation the faithful are 'consecrated to be [...] a holy priesthood.' The ministerial or hierarchical priesthood of bishops and priests, and the common priesthood of all the faithful participate, 'each in its own proper way, in the one priesthood of Christ.' While being 'ordered one to another,' they differ essentially. In what sense? While the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace, - a life of faith, hope, and charity, a life according to the Spirit - ,the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians. The ministerial priesthood is a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church. For this reason it is transmitted by its own sacrament, the sacrament of Holy Orders." *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Available in: <<http://bit.ly/1Y185jX>> Accessed; February 13, 2012. § 1546-1547.



between Christ's priesthood and the priesthood of all believers, Luther's references to the latter topic will only be considered in this article when they are somehow related to the understanding of the former. With this delimitation in mind, I will start by describing the concept of the priesthood of Christ in the theology of Luther.

The Priesthood of Christ

In this section, I present the concept of the priesthood of Christ in the theology of Luther. Overall, this concept is more thoroughly discussed in his lectures on the book and Genesis and in his commentary on Psalm 110. Therefore, I will describe Christ's priesthood in Luther's lectures on Genesis, and then in the commentary on Psalm 110.

Lectures on Genesis

After having completed a series of lectures on Psalms, Luther (1483-1546) lectured on Genesis from 1535 to 1545 (PELIKAN, 1968, p. ix).⁹ Before the discussion of Luther's concept of the priesthood of Christ in his lectures on Genesis, it is important to note how he conceives the notion of priesthood. Actually, in his comments on the

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⁹ Studies on Luther's theology generally take into account the distinction between the 'early' Luther and the 'later' Luther. According to Paul Zahl (2003, p. 26), "a theological break or departure in sometimes discerned within Luther's scholarship between the 'early' Luther and the 'later' Luther. The idea is that the Reformer started with a view of the gospel that stressed spiritual warfare, the principalities and powers of the world against the authority and command of Christ, the overthrow of human strongholds by means of the exorcising power of God. The 'early' Luther also stressed a theology of glory, i.e., of victory. The 'later' Luther moved more into ideas like forensic forgiveness and justification, imputation and also economic theories of the Atonement. The older he got, the more he began to sound like an orthodox Protestant theologian of the next century, the seventeenth". Probably, "Ritschl was the first to study Luther and his work with an evolutionary lens, distinguishing the early Luther from the later Luther, and separating Luther from Melancton and the later confessional and dogmatic writings. For those who research Luther's thinking, the most important contribution of this evolutionary method of research was Ritschl's insistence on the great difference between the young Luther and the mature Luther. Ritschl argued that the young Luther was more 'authentic,' since the mature Luther drastically changed his original teachings. A shift from the subjective to the objective understanding of justification occurred in the move from Luther to Lutheranism, but this same change occurred in Luther's writings themselves, in the move from the young to the mature Luther" (ANDERSON, 2006, p. 14). Overall, the break between the 'two Luthers' is placed at 1517-1518 (LOHSE, 1986, p. 144-145). Therefore, if this distinction is considered, the lectures on Genesis reflect the later Luther.

book of Genesis Luther connects the concept of priesthood with the birthright of primogeniture. At the outset, Luther interprets the banishment of Cain (Gn 4:10-16) in terms of “ecclesiastical punishment and with true excommunication” (LUTHER, 1958, p. 299). According to this view, “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” (LUTHER, 1958, p. 299).¹⁰ In other words, Cain not only left his home, which is interpreted by Luther as the fellowship of the church, but he also lost his birthright, which comprises the prerogative of priesthood and rule (LUTHER, 1958, p. 308).¹¹

Similarly, Luther claims that the book of Genesis and other books of the OT provide examples of firstborn sons who lost their birthright of the priesthood. In these cases, those who were born later assumed “the prerogative of rule and priesthood” (LUTHER, 1958, p. 244). For instance, Abraham enjoyed this birthright instead of Haran, and Jacob instead of Esau. Furthermore, David was anointed king despite the fact that he was the youngest son (LUTHER, 1958, p. 244).¹²

Therefore, in the context of the birthright primogeniture, Luther closely relates the notions of priesthood and rule/kingship. In this sense, he interprets the meaning of the primogeniture in the following way: “preeminent in the priesthood and in political position; that is, the first-born has the honor of the priesthood, supervision

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¹⁰ “For Cain considered it a great disgrace that at the sacred rite, in sight of his father and mother, God gave preference to Abel, whom he had always despised and whom his parents also had regarded as nothing, and declared him to be worthy of the honor of *sovereignty and priesthood*” (LUTHER, 1958, p. 262, emphasis mine).

¹¹ Luther (1958, p. 260) also compares the wrath of Cain with the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church. In his words, “this wrath of Cain we also observe in the Cainite church of the pope. What irritates the pope, the cardinals, kings, and princes more than that I, a beggar, give preference over their authority to the authority of God and in the name of the Lord reprove what deserves reproof? Even they themselves acknowledge that there are many things which are in need of a thoroughgoing reformation. But that an inconspicuous human being, and one who stepped out of an inconspicuous nook into public life, should carry this out—this is something utterly unbearable for them. Therefore they oppose us with their authority and attempt to overwhelm us by means of it”.

¹² In regards to Esau, Luther (1967, v. 5, p. 168) claims: “when he lost the blessing, as it then was, he at the same time also lost his father and mother and the entire inheritance, together with the kingship and the priesthood”. Hence, “Jacob is appointed king and priest, and [...] is invested with his rule and priesthood. [...] But finally, after Jacob has been mortified through faith in the invisible God, the visible blessing follows, the seed of Jacob takes possession of the land, and Christ is born from that seed—Christ, the eternal King and Priest whose kingdom and priesthood is contained in this blessing” (LUTHER, 1967, v. 5, p. 184).



and administration of doctrine, the Word, and the state” (LUTHER, 1965, p. 207).¹³ For Luther, the OT idea of double portion granted to the firstborn referred specifically to the prerogative of king/rule and priesthood (LUTHER, 1965, p. 154).¹⁴

Likewise, these two notions of kingship and priesthood appear in his comments on the increased wickedness prior to the Flood (Gen 6:1-8). From Luther’s perspective, the giants mentioned in this biblical passage are the symbol of arrogant people who usurp the prerogative of rule and priesthood (LUTHER, 1960, v. 2, p. 32), and he applies this biblical account to the Roman Catholic Church. He writes thus:

The pope does the same thing when he usurps both spiritual and temporal power. However, the chief evil would not lie in this if he made use of this usurped power only for the preservation of the state and the church. This is his greatest sin, that he misuses his power for the support of idolatry, for attacks on sound doctrine, and for tyranny even in the state. When the papists are reproved with the Word of God, they refuse to be reproved; they say that they are the church and cannot err, and they also rage against the godly with colossal brutality. Moses calls such men “giants,” who usurp powers, both of the state and that of the church, and sin without the least restraint (LUTHER, 1960, v. 2, p. 32-33).¹⁵

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¹³ Luther (1967, v. 5, p. 139) generally conceived of three hierarchies in the world, “namely, the household, the government, and the priesthood, or the home, the state, and the church. The home has the daily bread and is a daily realm, as it were. The government has things that are temporal and is more than a daily realm, because it endures throughout all time, excluding eternity. But the priesthood is above the household and the state; it pertains to the church and is heavenly and eternal”.

¹⁴ Referring to Ruben, Luther argues that “the birthright was taken away from it, that is, the kingdom and the priesthood.” Then, “Joseph, being born from his chief wife, would be his chief heir, to whom the birthright, the kingdom, and the priesthood was owed and a double portion of the inheritance.” More specifically, “Jacob seems to have adorned Joseph with a special white, priestly garment that he might signify his special love towards his son and his future dignity as a result of the priesthood” (LUTHER, 1969, p. 276, 337, 324). Luther does not provide scriptural evidence for his interpretation of the double portion (kingship and priesthood) of the birthright blessing.

¹⁵ Luther (1960, v. 2, p. 197) highlights that Nimrod, who is described in Genesis 10:8 as “the first on earth to be a mighty man,” did not get his power “by divine command or by the will of the fathers Shem and Arpachshad but through tyranny.” Hence, he was the first Turk or pope on earth after the Flood. His hand was against all the churches as well as all the states, while he used tyranny to gain for himself a sovereignty that did not belong to him but to Shem, who also had the priesthood”.



Moreover, Luther compares the Levitical priesthood with the priestly work of Christ. Even though the Levites were considered God's firstborn sons (Nm 3:40-49), they were not supposed to be an everlasting priesthood (LUTHER, 1964, p. 176). Rather, Christ is the promised and eternal king and priest (LUTHER, 1964, p. 177). Indeed, because the priesthood of Christ is eternal,¹⁶ based on Exodus 25:40 Luther concludes that this priesthood existed since the creation of the world (LUTHER, 1964, p. 177).¹⁷

While Christ as king is obviously associated with the idea of rule, Christ as priest is conceived in terms of blessing (LUTHER, 1964, p. 177). In his words, Christ "will not only rule but will also bless [...] for not only royal authority but also a priesthood is dealt with, and the name and office of priest embrace the foremost benefits of Christ" (LUTHER, 1964, p. 177). Actually, the blessings promised in the Holy Scriptures are effected through the priesthood of Christ (LUTHER, 1967, v. 5, p. 140).¹⁸ According to Luther, this priesthood and kingdom have a spiritual character in the sense that they are not visible or related to a specific place, time, or person (LUTHER, 1967, v. 5, p. 20). In the section below, I describe how Luther portrays the spiritual priesthood of Christ in his lectures on the book of Psalms.

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The Commentary on Psalm 110

Luther's commentary on Psalm 110 is a series of eight sermons preached in 1535 (PELIKAN, 1956, p. xii). In fact, he "had long cherished a high estimate of Psalm 110, calling it one of the most Christian psalms in the Old Testament" (PELIKAN, 1956, p. xii). In his remarks on this psalm, Luther depicts Christ as king and priest. As he emphasizes, "it is not enough for David to have Christ as King and Lord of all things. He proceeds to make a priest and pope of Him, if I may be pardoned for this last term in reference to this Person" (LUTHER, 1956, p.

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¹⁶ "Christ was a Priest after the order of Melchizedek — a Priest whose beginning and end are unknown" (LUTHER, 1964, p. 151).

¹⁷ "When God says to Moses in Exodus 25:40: 'And see that you make them after the pattern which is being shown you on the mountain,' he concluded that the warning about that pattern or type was not given so carefully without a purpose; and he decided that Moses surely had before his eyes and in view the future blessing through Christ. For Moses is the shadow or figure that preceded Christ, who was to come. Therefore the true priesthood was in existence from the very beginning of the world, first covertly but later on promised more clearly to Abraham" (LUTHER, 1964, p. 177).

¹⁸ Comparatively, Luther (1967, v. 5, p. 141) argues that "in the same way the patriarchs had in their hands the power to bless, that is, to teach on the strength of a definite promise that their descendants would have sustenance, dominion, and the priesthood".



304). From this perspective, through His priestly office this King acts as a mediator between God and His people, particularly directing their conscience toward God and providing the interpretation of God's word and will (LUTHER, 1956, p. 304). For Luther, the combination between the kingly and priestly offices shows that Christ is a different kind of king (LUTHER, 1956, p. 306),¹⁹ since His priestly and kingly offices are spiritual, not temporal (LUTHER, 1956, p. 306). Luther's understanding of this spiritual priesthood is unfolded in two main ways: (1) by his description of the functions of a priest, and (2) by his attacks against the Roman Catholic perversion of this priesthood.

The Functions of a Priest

Broadly speaking, Luther argues that according to the Scriptures a priest appointed by God is essentially a mediator between God and humans (LUTHER, 1956, p. 315).²⁰ More specifically, this mediation takes place in three necessary functions: “[1] to teach or preach God's Word, [2] to sacrifice, and [3] to pray”

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¹⁹ In regards to a kingly and priestly office according to ‘the manner of the world,’ Luther highlights that God made a clear distinction between these offices in the OT. “From the very beginning God separated and ordained the tribe of Levi, particularly the house or family of Aaron, for the priesthood and spiritual government (Num. 8:16). Furthermore, God so guided the development of history that the family of Aaron always retained the priesthood, so that no one else presumed to seize the office, not even David himself. But now David proceeds to reach for the priestly office too when he says that this promised Son of his—Christ—is not to be King only (an office which properly belongs to Him, according to God's ordinance) but also a Priest at the same time, even though He did not belong to the priestly family of Aaron or to the tribe of Levi. However, since Christ was to be born of the tribe of Judah, He could not logically be a priest. David here contradicts Moses, in fact, the established order of God. Really, David deserves to be denounced as a heretic or a rebellious prophet and teacher for apparently presuming to grasp for the priestly office in behalf of his Descendant, in crass contradiction to God's express command. God clearly wanted the two offices, king and priest, separately maintained. This is something which secular insight has also discerned as necessary. Yet David, according to this verse, wants to unite the kingly and priestly functions in one person!” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 305-306).

²⁰ Luther (1956, p. 316) thinks that the term priest is “the highest and most glorious name and title that can be named or praised on earth. It has the highest honor next to the Divine Majesty. A priest stands in the closest relation to God, and He Himself praises and honors the office to the utmost”.



(LUTHER, 1956, p. 315).²¹ In this sense, the primary function of a priest is to teach/preach God's word and doctrine (LUTHER, 1956, p. 316). In terms of the content of this teaching, Luther underlines his traditional distinction between the law and the gospel. Based on this distinction, the purpose of the preaching of the law is to let people recognize their sin. Additionally, the curses of the law may lead them to plead for God's grace (LUTHER, 1956, p. 316). He assumes that "[n]o one can repent and obtain forgiveness unless he knows his sin and feels God's wrath. For this reason Christ Himself, as well as the apostles, began by preaching repentance. Thereby they confirmed the preaching of the Law" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 316).

However, the most important aspect of preaching is related to the presentation of the gospel (LUTHER, 1956, p. 317). To put differently, the true priestly office consists of preaching God's grace and the forgiveness of sins (LUTHER, 1956, p. 317).²² As Luther points out, "this priestly office properly belongs to Christ and is completely derived from Him" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 317), since "He personally began the office of the public preaching of the Gospel" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 317).²³

The second function of a priest is related to sacrifice. Based on the ideas of reconciliation and forgiveness as expressed in Hebrews 5:1, Luther indicates that the purpose of the divine appointment of a priest is to make sacrifice for humans sins (LUTHER, 1956, p. 318). Indeed, Luther argues that the sacrificial office is restricted

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²¹ Luther (1956, p. 315) indicates that "a priest comes from God and brings us His Word and doctrine; again, he presents himself to God to sacrifice and pray for us." He adds, "If anyone does not exercise these functions of the office, but still wants to be called a priest or pope, he does not deserve this beautiful and glorious name. This applies to those who are the masks of our pope, those false bishops, along with their anointed and tonsured mob. By their entire life and conduct they bring disrepute and dishonor upon this noble name, so that it is not honored as highly as it ought to be".

²² Luther (1956, p. 318) claims that "this kind of priestly office is revealed through Melchizedek (Gen. 14:19) when he blesses Abraham. Thus, he is not merely a type or a picture of Christ and His priesthood but one who has actually exercised that very same office as a preacher of the Gospel. For this reason, he was also called a priest of God before Aaron's priestly office existed. His act of blessing Abraham was nothing else than to promise him God's grace, help, and protection. The basis of Melchizedek's blessing is the promise of Christ which was given to Abraham, that a Seed was to be born of him in whom all the world was to be blessed (Gen. 12:8)".

²³ As Luther (LUTHER, 1956, p. 317) emphasizes, "this office of preaching derives from Him who is Himself the High Priest; and the only content of its message is about Him".



to the person of Christ as high priest (LUTHER, 1956, p. 318),²⁴ and was fulfilled by His own sacrifice on the altar of the cross (LUTHER, 1956, p. 319).

Finally, the third function of the priestly office is the intercessory prayer. Taking into account the prayers of Christ on the cross, Luther thinks that this priestly function was partially accomplished in His sacrifice on the cross. “Along with, and beyond, His sacrifice Christ also prayed to God the Father in our behalf” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 320).²⁵ Luther also interprets Christ’s words in John 17 as a priestly intercessory prayer that communicates the power and merit of His sacrifice (LUTHER, 1956, p. 320). In fact, Luther connects this intercessory prayer with the ongoing office of Christ as mediator before God, as mentioned in Romans 8:34. For Luther, this ongoing activity does not take place because of the nature of Christ’s sacrifice but due to human weaknesses. Even though Christ’s sacrifice was perfectly completed once and for all and “suffices until the Last Day, [...] we are still sinful and spiritually weak” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 320). In this way, Christ unceasingly intercedes for us before the Father for two main reasons, which can be related respectively with the notions of forensic justification and sanctification: (1) “that such weakness and sin may not be reckoned to our account”; (2) that He may “grant us the strength and power of the Holy Spirit to overcome sin” (LUTHER,

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²⁴ In his polemic against Roman Catholicism, Luther (1956, p. 319) affirms: “if the sacrifice of these priests, persons whom God designated and established for this office, could not take away sin and mediate forgiveness, how much less can sin be paid for, or satisfaction be rendered, by means of the mere works of man, such as the self-chosen worship of God, the Mass of the priests, and monasticism? The pope and his priesthood have falsely boasted of these and thereby have blasphemously revolted against Christ. But Christ is the only Priest whom God has assigned to the task of reconciling us to Him and obtaining the forgiveness of sins”.

²⁵ Luther (1956, p. 320) quotes Isaiah 53:12 and Hebrews 5:7. As he states, “Isaiah 53:12 speaks of this function of His priestly office: ‘He bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.’ And Hebrews 5:7 reads: ‘In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears; and He was heard for His godly fear’”.

1956, p. 320).²⁶ However, for Luther, the ascended Christ not only prays for us, but also grants us the power and freedom to pray directly to God, by bringing our prayers to God (LUTHER, 1956, p. 320). Concisely, the benefits of Christ's priestly intercessory prayer are the following: (1) it communicates to us the power and merit of His sacrifice, for the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life; (2) it gives us strength and power to overcome sin and the temptations of Satan; (3) it preserves us in God's grace; and (4) it brings our prayers to God.

In summary, Christ's priesthood fulfills all the three priestly functions. Firstly, in His preaching He "proclaims God's grace and promises us the forgiveness of our sins" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 321). Secondly, "He has made the true priestly sacrifice for us, which has the power of reconciling God and of removing our sin from us" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 321). Thirdly, He "represents us before God with His intercessions in our behalf, so that we may continue in this reconciliation and grace and be preserved in it" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 321). Nevertheless, from Luther's perspective this priesthood is perverted by Roman Catholicism.

88 The Roman Catholic Perversion of Christ's Priesthood

Overall, Luther's attacks against the Roman Catholic perversion of Christ's priesthood may be divided in two main parts: the sacrifice of the mass and the belief in other mediators. In opposition to the sacrifice of the mass,

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²⁶ Luther claims that the reason why Christ "ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of God was to preserve us forever in God's grace through His intercessions and, further, to give us power and victory over the terrors of sin, Satan, and the temptations of the world and our flesh." Ibid. Recently, scholarship in Luther studies has debated about the relationship between forensic justification and sanctification, and consequently about Luther's concept of justification. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (2008, p. 449) indicates that the so-called Mannermaa school at the University of Helsinki has fostered a new interpretation of Luther's view of justification. In contrast to the prevailing German Old School approach and the theology of the Lutheran confessions, this new interpretation claims that "Luther does not make a distinction between forensic and effective justification, but rather argues that justification includes both. In other words, in line with Catholic theology, justification means both declaring righteous and making righteous" (see also KÄRKKÄINEN, 2011, p. 220-222; GASSMANN, 1999, p. 80; MANNERMAA, 2005). Another aspect of the debate is related to the fact that this new interpretation suggests that Luther's view of justification implies the notion of deification or *theosis* (see PERSAUD, 2008, p. 512; LOHSE, 2011, p. 221). However, the discussion does not seem to take into account the concept of priesthood of Christ and its relationship with the ideas of forensic justification and sanctification/effective justification.



Luther affirms that Christ did not ordain the sacrament of the Eucharist in terms of sacrifice, since the sacrifice was once performed by the true High Priest on the cross (LUTHER, 1956, p. 313). However, the saving practice of eating and drinking the bread and wine is perverted and desecrated by the pope (LUTHER, 1956, p. 313),²⁷ who sets up “his own clericalism in opposition to the holy priestly office of Christ, and his own sacrifice” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 313-314).²⁸ As a result, Luther thinks that the church of the pope has created its own priesthood that stands apart from Christ, and ultimately silences the priestly work of Christ (LUTHER, 1956, p. 325).²⁹

More specifically, Luther explains that the pope silences Christ’s priesthood by presenting Him as a terrible judge (LUTHER, 1956, p. 326),³⁰ and therefore by replacing His mediatorial work by the intercession of Mary and other saints (LUTHER, 1956, p. 327). To put differently, because humans are unable “to do sufficient penance and good works, and consequently” remain “always and utterly in terror and fear of His wrath, they directed us further to the saints in heaven; these were supposed to be the

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²⁷ Luther (1956, p. 314) highlights, “His oily monks boast of their chrism and refuse to let Christians share in the eating and drinking of the Sacrament, something that Christ did and commanded to be done. Instead, they grasp it for themselves and make sacrifice with it”.

²⁸ According to Luther (1956, p. 314), “the work of the clerics, their manipulation of bread and wine upon the altar, and their retention of the wine for themselves, became the daily sacrifice, whereby forgiveness of sins was obtained for Christendom. It is as though Christ had not done this very thing on the cross, as though His sacrifice had no validity and were of no value! However, their most shameful perversion is that they have made a public market of the Mass, selling their sacrifice for the benefit both of the living and of the dead in their imaginary purgatory”.

²⁹ In Luther’s words (1956, p. 313), the church of the pope “no longer cared to hear Christ; instead, they began to preach on their own and to develop their own priesthood, worship, sacrifice, and holiness, apart from Christ. Thus, Christ became silent. For if anyone preaches of our own merit, monasticism, indulgence, Masses, pilgrimage, and purgatory, Christ will surely depart”.

³⁰ According to Luther (1956, p. 313), the pope’s doctrine teaches, “absolutely nothing concerning this priestly office of Christ. On the contrary, Christ is represented as a terrifying Judge. His exacting and serious wrath was impressed on the people to such a degree that they had to flee from Him. This view was driven so deeply into the hearts of people that I and others were terrified when we heard the name of Christ.” Ibid. As Luther emphasizes, “all of us had been taught that we ourselves must render satisfaction for our sins and that on the Last Day Christ would demand an account from us regarding how we did penance for sin and how many good works we accomplished”.

mediators between us and Christ” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 326).³¹ In this sense, Luther argues that Roman Catholicism has established its own priestly office instead of the priestly office of Christ (LUTHER, 1956, p. 327).

In contrast to this misconception of Christ as a terrible judge, Luther emphasizes the image of Christ as “the only and true Priest before God for all eternity” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 328). In fact, this statement has two main implications. First, the priesthood of Christ nullifies human works. As a matter of fact, the very existence of a priest that reconciles us to God through His sacrifice and intercession implies that human efforts cannot achieve this reconciliation (LUTHER, 1956, p. 328). Second, the priesthood of Christ does not bring fear, but comfort (LUTHER, 1956, p. 321).³² Actually, one of its main purposes is to work “with those who have weaknesses, frailties, and sins, and who therefore possess a shy, burdened, and disturbed conscience” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 321).³³

In summary, this section showed that in his lectures on Genesis Luther emphasized that Christ spiritually performs a kingly and priestly office. In addition, in his commentary on Psalm 110, Luther highlights that Christ fulfills three priestly functions: to teach/preach God’s Word, to sacrifice, and to pray. In contrast to the Roman Catholic perversion of Christ’s priesthood, particularly through the sacrifice of the mass and the belief in other mediators, Luther indicates that the priesthood of Christ affirms that our salvation is not based in our works, and that this priestly work is the source of our comfort and hope. In the

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³¹ In Luther’s words (1956, p. 326), “they taught us to call upon the dear mother of Christ and to urge her, for the sake of the breasts which she gave her Son, to plead against His wrath over us and to obtain His grace. And if our dear lady did not suffice, we enlisted the help of the apostles and other saints, until we finally came to the point of calling upon saints of whom no one knows whether they are holy, such as St. Anne, St. Barbara, St. Christopher, St. George. In fact, most of them never were holy. But they had to be invoked as intercessors and helpers in need”.

³² Luther (1956, p. 322) positively asks, “Is there anything more glorious or exalted than to know that as a High Priest we have a Man who is also the Son of God and who sits in majesty at the right hand of God? If we had the power to make a wish, could we possibly desire anything greater or better than to have with God a Mediator and Advocate of this stature?”

³³ According to Luther (1956, p. 325-326), in the priestly office of Christ “is all our comfort and hope, all that needs to be preached and believed for our salvation. Everyone who enshrines this in his heart and keeps it will have comfort and joy all his life. He will never be afraid. Here he learns that Christ, the Son of God, wants to be our Priest. This is not for one hour or for one day; nor is His Mass or priestly office of as brief duration as the private Mass of a popish priest. But He has been a Priest since the day He became the Christ and began to sacrifice His body. He continues to present His sacrifice to the Father, to plead for us without ceasing, until the end of the world”.



next section, I will explore how this conception of Christ's priesthood influences Luther's understanding of the priesthood of all believers.

The Priesthood of All Believers

In the present section, I will discuss the priesthood of Christ as the source for the Christian priesthood, the functions of the Christian priesthood, and the relationship between ministry, ordination, and priesthood.

The Source of the Christian Priesthood

In Luther's conception, the priesthood of Christ is the source of the Christian priesthood. Luther mentions that "in His own person Christ is indeed the only High Priest between God and us all. Nevertheless, He has bestowed this name on us, too, so that we who believe in Him are also priests, just as we are called Christians after Him" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 329).³⁴ According to Luther, all Christians are priests through baptism. Those who are born spiritually in Christ by means of baptism are in fact children of a priest, being inheritors of the same role of their father (LUTHER, 1956, p. 329). Therefore, Luther affirms that "every baptized Christian is a priest already, not by appointment or ordination from the pope or any other man, but because Christ Himself has begotten him as a priest and has given birth to him in Baptism" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 329).³⁵ Using the language of the OT, those who have this spiritual birth are made firstborns of Christ and receive the double portion of kingdom and priesthood (LUTHER, 1960, v. 9, p. 141).³⁶

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³⁴ As Luther (1956, p. 329) declares, "we have heard that we have no other High Priest than Christ, the Son of God, our Lord. Hence, it follows that no one can be called a priest unless he has been born to this heritage of and through Christ, just as a child has its name and rights by heredity from its father. It is clear, therefore, that those who will be priests must be born as children of this Priest, and that those who are born of Him are, and are called, priests—all of them".

³⁵ For helpful information about baptism in Luther's theology, see Trigg (1994).

³⁶ Actually, 1 Peter 2:9 connects the concepts of kingdom and priesthood through the expression "royal priesthood".



However, the priesthood of Christ is not only the source of the existence of the Christian priesthood of all believers, but it also provides the functional structure of the Christian priesthood.

The Functions of the Christian Priesthood

Roughly speaking, the Christian priesthood has the same functions of the priesthood of Christ, namely, preaching, sacrifice, and prayer (LUTHER, 1956, p. 332). It means that the Christian priesthood is supposed “to preach the Word, to pray for the congregation, and to sacrifice themselves before God” (LUTHER, 1967, v. 30, p. 55). Nevertheless, these functions must be understood as based on the priesthood of Christ, and not as a replacement of His priesthood. More specifically, Luther argues that “Christ is the only High Priest. Before we attempt to do such priestly works, we must have the benefit of His priestly office” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 332).³⁷

In other words, the sacrifices of the Christian priesthood do not assume a salvific role, because the forgiveness of sins is obtained only through the sacrifice of Christ (LUTHER, 1956, p. 333).³⁸ Rather, these sacrifices are understood in terms of worship to God, especially based on the biblical idea of a ‘living sacrifice’ (Rom 21:1). In effect, most of Luther’s comments about the sacrifice of the Christians are in the

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³⁷ As Luther (1956, p.333) indicates, Christ “alone has made the complete sacrifice for us all by which we are reconciled to God. Therefore, He is also the only one who stands in the immediate presence of God to make intercessions for us, and without this Mediator no prayer is acceptable to God”.

³⁸ “Christians do not exercise their priestly sacrifice for the purpose of obtaining forgiveness of sins, either for themselves or for others. They obtain forgiveness of sins only through the sacrifice of Christ. It alone is valid for the reconciliation of all men with God” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 333).



context of persecution and suffering for the sake of the gospel, which finds its full expression in the experience of martyrdom (LUTHER, 1956, p. 333).³⁹

In addition, Luther points out that “the prayers of Christians accompany such sacrifices because they are driven to pray in view of their various sufferings and afflictions” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 334). Nevertheless, these prayers are not meritorious in themselves but rely on the mediatorial work of Christ, who presents the prayers before God (LUTHER, 1956, p. 334).⁴⁰

In the context of these three priestly functions, Luther regards the preaching/teaching of the word as the most important function of the Christian priesthood.⁴¹ Indeed, the preaching of the Christian priesthood has as its primary content the work of Christ,

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³⁹ Luther (1956, p.333-334) thinks that “if anyone will confess Christ, he must risk his property, honor, body, and life. Hence if we are deprived of them because of our confession, then our body and life, possessions and honor, are truly sacrificed to God. These are genuine sacrifices [...] because they are made to the praise and glory of God.” Luther also emphasizes that “such sacrifices were rigorously practiced and urged at the time of the dear martyrs. They paid for their confession of Christ with their bodies and lives. Nor was this done only by the bishops and preachers, who led the others; but young children and virgins did the same thing. For example, St. Agnes was a maid thirteen years old. All these have been true priests and priestesses, for they sacrificed their bodies. They honored God by their service and obedience and strengthened and comforted others by their example. In accordance with this, the life, activity, and suffering of Christians are genuinely holy and Godpleasing sacrifices, provided that they are performed in the faith that we have forgiveness of sins and please God because of His sacrifice, so that thereby God is praised and others are improved and induced to praise and thank God, too.” Luther (1967, p. 54) also indicates that “a spiritual sacrifice is not money contributed as a sacrifice to the pope. Nor is it, as in the Old Testament, the obligatory sacrificing of the tenth part of everything. Such physical sacrifices and such a priesthood have all ceased now. Today everything is new and spiritual. Christ is the Priest, and we are all priests. Just as He sacrificed His body, so we, too, must sacrifice ourselves”.

⁴⁰ For Luther (LUTHER, 1956, p. 334), “this is the great honor which belongs to Christians: He has anointed us and made us worthy, so that we may appear before God in prayer.” Ibid. Luther also highlights that “everything must have its source in Him. Only through Him does anything avail in the sight of God. But if, for example, a young child who is baptized prays the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer each morning or evening at the table, it is a true prayer; and God hears him. Such a child prays as a Christian and a priest, born in Baptism and ordained by Christ”.

⁴¹ “Every Christian has and practices such priestly works. But above these activities is the communal office of public teaching” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 334).



which is the message of the gospel about God's grace.⁴² It means that "this priestly office properly belongs to Christ and is completely derived from Him. He alone is the One for whose sake God's grace and forgiveness are bestowed" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 317).⁴³

According to Luther, every Christian who has become a priest in Christ by baptism and through faith receives the power of preaching/teaching about the gospel (LUTHER, 1956, p. 333). Obviously, it does not imply that everyone has the gift or calling to perform public office of preaching. But every Christian is called to "teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and rebuke his neighbor with the Word of God at every opportunity and whenever necessary" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 333).⁴⁴

As a matter of fact, the acknowledgement that not everybody is called to the public office of preaching implies that certain Christians need to be selected for this office (LUTHER, 1956, p. 333). This statement leads us to the discussion of the relationship between ministry, ordination, and priesthood.

Ministry, ordination, and priesthood

In regards to the relationship between ministry and priesthood, Luther stipulates that although the priestly office is common to all Christians, it does not eliminate the necessity of ministers, preachers, or pastors in the church. However, this ministry is not a priestly work in the common sense of the work of a priest in the Scriptures (LUTHER, 1956, p. 331). As Luther suggests, the ministers "became priests before they received their office, in fact, when they were baptized. Hence they are not priests because of their calling or office. The Scripture calls them 'servants' or 'bishops,' that is, overseers; the apostles speak of them as presbyters, that is, elders" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 331).⁴⁵ In this

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⁴² "This is nothing other than a public preaching of the grace of God and the forgiveness of sins, which Christ Himself commanded to be proclaimed universally and to be given to all who believe in Him" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 317).

⁴³ In other words, "this office of preaching derives from Him who is Himself the High Priest; and the only content of its message is about Him" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 317-318).

⁴⁴ Luther (1956, p. 333) provides some examples: "father and mother should do this for their children and household; a brother, neighbor, citizen, or peasant for the other. Certainly one Christian may instruct and admonish another ignorant or weak Christian concerning the Ten Commandments, the Creed, or the Lord's Prayer. And he who receives such instruction is also under obligation to accept it as God's Word and publicly to confess it".

⁴⁵ Luther (LUTHER, 1956, p. 331) indicates that "the best, the most mature men, well-tried, learned, fit, and experienced, were chosen for this office. This is the reason why the term 'presbyter' was used, for it means the same as 'an old man.' It is certainly fitting to choose such men for any administrative duty; in fact, Scripture commands this".



sense, Luther argues that the ministers must be selected by the church from the body of Christians in the same way that officials are appointed in secular government (LUTHER, 1956, p. 331).⁴⁶

Actually, Luther provides two reasons for the distinction between common priesthood and the ministry office, namely, the different gifts of the Spirit and the necessity of order in the church. Based on the different spiritual gifts mentioned in Ephesians 4:11-12 he states, “out of the multitude of Christians some must be selected who shall lead the others by virtue of the special gifts and aptitude which God gives them for the office” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 332). In terms of the practical need of order in the church, Luther believes that “preachers and pastors are necessary” because “this office cannot be attended to by all the members of a congregation. Neither is it fitting that each household do its own baptizing and celebrating of the Sacrament. Hence it is necessary to select and ordain those who can preach and teach, who study the Scriptures, and who are able to defend them” (LUTHER, 1956, p. 334) Following this perspective, for the sake of order, the ministers administer the sacraments based on the authority conferred by the congregation (LUTHER, 1956, p. 334).⁴⁷

Surely, this conception has significant implications for Luther’s understanding of ordination in the ministry. In effect, ordination is conditioned by the understanding of the gifts of the Spirit and the practical necessity of order in the church, which means that there is no ontological distinction between the ordained ministry and the members of

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⁴⁶ Luther (1956, p. 331-332) explains, “one does not become a citizen by being elected burgomaster or judge, but one is elected to the office because one already possesses citizenship and is a member of the citizenry. A burgomaster, therefore, brings his citizenship with him into his office”.

⁴⁷ Luther (1956, p. 334) affirms that such functions “do not pertain to the priesthood as such but belong to the public office which is performed in behalf of all those who are priests, that is, Christians”. He (LUTHER, 1956, p. 334) also emphasizes that “if everyone were to preach to his neighbor or if they did things for one another without orderly procedure, it would take a long time indeed to establish a congregation”. Luther (1968, p. 16-17) claims that “although all can teach and exhort, nevertheless one ought to do so, and the other ought to listen, so that they do not speak at the same time. Therefore it should be noted that it was Paul’s ordinance that he should select ‘elders’ (in the plural) in each city, and they are called bishops and elders”.

the church, but only a functional distinction.⁴⁸ In Luther's words, "the preaching office is no more than a public service which happens to be conferred upon someone by the entire congregation, all the members of which are priests" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 333).⁴⁹ On this basis, Luther rejects the conception of ordination as sacrament,⁵⁰ which is qualified by him as "mere fiction" (LUTHER, 1959, p. 114). Particularly fictitious is the claim that ordination imprints an indelible character on the soul (LUTHER, 1959, p. 201).⁵¹

In short, Luther thinks that the Roman Catholic notion of ordination has two main problems: it downplays baptism and, then, "divides the priestly people

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⁴⁸ As Ulrich S. Leupold (1986, p. 122-123) indicates, Luther composed the rite of ordination in 1539, entitled *The Ordination of Ministers of the Word*. "The rite of ordination Luther composed was an entirely new creation. It had no more than the name in common with the sacrament of ordination in the Roman church. Roman ordination was a sacrament, Lutheran ordination a rite. Roman ordination admitted a man to a special order or rank within Christendom. Lutheran ordination gave him certain functions. Roman ordination conferred on the candidate the power to conduct the sacrifice of the mass. Lutheran ordination set him aside for the work of preaching and administering the sacraments. According to Luther, every Christian was a priest, and baptism the true sacrament of ordination. But to exercise this priesthood publicly for the benefit of others, a man needed a call. That is why Luther often spoke of ordaining a minister in the sense of calling him. For a long time he was not too concerned about the public rite which might follow the call. He hesitated before he composed an order for it and did not even publish the one he devised, although it was ultimately printed in many church orders. Of course, in the beginning of the Reformation the need for an order of ordination was not very pressing. Most of the early preachers of the gospel were, like Luther himself, former priests, and the hope that the bishops would ultimately espouse the Protestant cause had not been given up. But as the gulf between Wittenberg and Rome deepened and most of the bishops sided with the pope, the need for an evangelical rite of ordination in which the ministers of the Word would have their call publicly attested became more and more urgent. The congregations had to know what men were qualified and properly certified to exercise the office of the Word, and the candidates needed a commissioning service on which to base their claim for authority. The first evangelical ordination in Wittenberg had taken place as early as 1525, when Luther ordained Georg Rörer, but it was not until 1535 that the Elector John Frederick set out a definite order for the examination, calling, and ordination of candidates. Luther was frequently the ordinator, and the order he composed was soon accepted in Lutheran churches everywhere".

⁴⁹ "According to what the Scriptures teach us, what we call the priesthood is a ministry. So I cannot understand at all why one who has once been made a priest cannot again become a layman; for the sole difference between him and a layman is his ministry" (LUTHER, 1959, p. 117).

⁵⁰ "The order [of priesthood] is not a sacrament, but a ministry and a calling of the ministers of the church" (LUTHER, 1960, v. 34, p. 357).

⁵¹ He ironically writes, "I admit that the pope imparts this 'character,' but Christ knows nothing of it" (LUTHER, 1959, p. 117).



of Christ into clergy and laity” (LUTHER, 1959, p. 201). In the first case, Roman Catholicism makes ordination, and not baptism, the starting point of the Christian priesthood. It implies that baptism is less important than ordination (LUTHER, 1959, p. 201).⁵² For Luther, through this idea of priesthood by ordination Catholicism creates another priesthood that suppresses Christ’s priesthood and the Christian priesthood (LUTHER, 1959, p. 201).⁵³

In the context of the Christian priesthood, the division between ordained and lay priests affects the interpretation of 1 Peter 2:9⁵⁴, the main NT text that refers to the priesthood of all believers. As Luther reveals, a Roman Catholic writer in the sixteenth century suggested that the words of Peter refer to a twofold priesthood: (1) “the spiritual priesthood which is common to all Christians”; and (2) “the ‘outward’ priesthood” of the ordained priests (LUTHER, 1959, p. 141).⁵⁵ However, Luther contends that the NT only knows the spiritual priesthood (LUTHER, 2003, v. 39, p. 153),⁵⁶ since “Scripture makes all of us equal priests” and “the churchly priesthood which we now separate from laymen” is called ministry, episcopate, and presbytery in Scripture (LUTHER, 2003, v.

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⁵² “For they permit the ministry of baptism to all, and yet consider the priesthood as their own property and baptism as impossible without their priests. They themselves have established it as the first sacrament and have permitted no one but priests to administer sacraments. But one sacrament cannot be of greater rank than another, since all are founded on the same Word of God” (LUTHER, 2003, v. 40, p. 23).

⁵³ Luther, Word and Sacrament II, LW, 36:201.

⁵⁴ “But you are a chosen race, a *royal priesthood*, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9 ESV, emphasis mine).

⁵⁵ This is a reference to Emser’s *Quadruplica* (1521) (see also LUTHER, 2003, v. 40, p.22; LUTHER, 2003, v. 39, p. 152, 159, 230).

⁵⁶ With regard to 1 Peter 2:9, Luther (1959, p. 141-142) asks: “To whom did St. Peter say these words? Did he not say them to all Christians, in that he bids them to long for the genuine, pure spiritual milk and in it grow up and increase to their salvation? (1Pet 2:2). To grow up and increase in grace, does not this pertain to all Christians? And following that, are not all Christians to be built upon Christ into a holy priesthood? (1Pet 2:5). [...] For Peter’s words apply to all Christians of whichever priesthood; they make the priesthood common to all Christians”.



39, p. 154).⁵⁷ Following this perspective, he points out that there is no outward or visible priesthood in the NT because Christ is the only priest (LUTHER, 1959, p. 138).⁵⁸

Since Luther's argument against the idea of a physical, external, or ecclesiastical priesthood is the reality of the priesthood of Christ, it follows that the affirmation of an external/ecclesiastical priesthood modifies the understanding of the priesthood of Christ. In this sense, Luther believes that the pope usurped the priesthood of Christ by separating the ordained priests "from the ordinary Christians and have called themselves uniquely the 'clergy of God'" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 329). As a matter of fact, Luther identifies the Catholic idea of apostolic succession as the basis for the replacement of Christ's priesthood

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⁵⁷ Luther (2003, p. 154) emphatically affirms that "nowhere is it called 'priesthood'".

⁵⁸ For Luther (1959, p. 138), to say that there is only "a spiritual priesthood, held in common by all Christians, through which we are all priests with Christ," means that "we are children of Christ, the high priest; we need no priest or mediator other than Christ". In the context of the spiritual priesthood common to all Christians, Luther (1956, p. 295-296) highlights that the "ordination and anointment is far different from the chrism and oil of the false priests and false bishops of our pope who, despite their ordination, their ornaments, and the splendor in which they present themselves to the public as priests, may yet be hypocrites, unholy and godless people. Christians, however, must be completely holy priests and possess holy adornment; for He who ordains Christians as priests is a Person different from anyone else. He is the one High Priest Jesus Christ, of whom we shall soon hear more. The chrism, anointing, and priestly ordination He bestows is quite different; it is the Holy Spirit who adorns them in glory and holiness and clothes them in His power and with His gifts. It is He who must dwell in the people who are to be priests before God; He must dress them in their holy adornment and priestly garments. The ornaments and ostentatious pageantry—hoods, hats, staff, and whatever else it is in which the pope's false faces love to deck themselves out—do not count here or add anything to this." In contrast, the spiritual priesthood has the "right adornment. They have the right mitres on their heads, mitres adorned with verses and illustrations from the Scriptures instead of with precious pearls. Thereby they can instruct and comfort people. They wear a cross of real gold or pearls on the tips of their mitres because they are people ready to suffer everything for the sake of confessing Christ, who is the Lord and the glory of our heads (1 Cor. 11:3). They are clothed with an alb of pure white linen, that is, with a good conscience, a pure life, and good works".



by the church's ordained priesthood.⁵⁹ In his words, "they shamelessly say in their *Decretal Translatio Sacerdotio* that Christ has transferred His priestly office to St. Peter and that St. Peter in turn has assigned it to the pope in Rome" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 329).⁶⁰

In opposition to the Roman Catholic conception, Luther firmly believes that the priesthood of Christ was never transferred by means of apostolic succession. Rather, Christ "remains the true Priest before God. As such, He speaks to us, sacrifices for us, and forever prays for us. Neither St. Peter nor any other man on earth is a priest in such a way that Christ has abdicated the office in his favor or transferred it to him" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 329).⁶¹ Accordingly, all Christians are "comforted and saved by the power of His priestly office," and therefore share in this priesthood, "not merely St. Peter and the apostles, or the pope and the bishops" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 330-331).

In summary, according to Luther, the priesthood of Christ is the source of the existence of the Christian priesthood of all believers. In other words, all Christians are born in Christ's kingdom through baptism, and as children of the Priest, they are also priests. Moreover, the priesthood of Christ provides the functional structure of the Christian priesthood. Based on the priesthood of Christ, the Christian priests, that is, the baptized Christians, preach the Word, pray for the congregation, and spiritually sacrifice themselves before God. In fact, this perspective has significant implications for the understanding of ministry and ordination. In short, ministry and priesthood are two different categories. The second category comprises all baptized Christians, whereas the first one refers to Christians separated for the office of leadership in the church, based on the theological notion of spiritual gifts and on the practical

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⁵⁹ Luther (1959, p. 218) describes the distinction between Christ's priesthood and the pope's priesthood. Christ as the high priest: (1) "His law is grace and life"; (2) "The sacrifice is a living body"; (3) "Good works are to serve one's neighbor"; (4) "Sin is to omit this"; (5) "The punishment is eternal death"; (6) "The reward is eternal life"; (7) "His servants are the preachers of God's Word"; (8) "The consequence is the bearing of the cross with joy." The pope as the high priest: (1) "His law is the canon law"; (2) "The sacrifice is the sacrament of the altar and money"; (3) "Good works are to pretend outward piety with singing, fasting, and prayer"; (4) "Sin is to omit this"; (5) "The punishment is the invented ban"; (6) "The reward is peace and property in this world"; (7) "His servants are the proclaimers of bulls"; (8) "The consequence is bad consciences".

⁶⁰ Luther (1956, p. 330) asks, "what kind of priests would St. Peter and all the popes and their clerics be if it were not for the fact that Christ is and remains the High Priest? I would pay no attention to St. Peter, still less to the pope in Rome, if I did not have Christ Himself as my Priest. But it must happen that as a true antichrist the pope will reject Christ and His priestly office".

⁶¹ Luther (1956, p. 330) believes that when the idea of apostolic succession is applied to Christ's priesthood, "it is as though Christ were no longer needed, as though He sat in heaven without anything at all to do, and as though He had nothing at all to do with us! It is all directly contrary to this verse, which reads: 'Thou art a Priest forever'".



necessity of order in the church. It implies that the idea of ordination is functional and not ontological. Ideally, the locus of authority is with the church community, which selects and ordains the ministers. Certainly, this notion is very different from the Roman Catholic conception of priestly ministry and ordination. It seems that Luther's main argument against the Catholic position, especially the view of a twofold priesthood of all believers (an ordained priesthood and a lay priesthood), is the reality of the priesthood of Christ, a priesthood that has not been transferred to anyone else.

Conclusion

In light of the description above, it is possible to respond to the questions enunciated in the introduction of this article. First, for Luther, the priesthood of Christ must be understood as a spiritual activity of His kingly and priestly office. This activity comprises three main functions, namely, preaching, sacrifice, and intercessory prayer: (1) "by His Word and preaching He proclaims God's grace and promises us the forgiveness of our sins" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 321); (2) "He has made the true priestly sacrifice for us, which has the power of reconciling God and of removing our sin from us" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 321); (3) He "represents us before God with His intercessions in our behalf, so that we may continue in this reconciliation and grace and be preserved in it" (LUTHER, 1956, p. 321). In fact, Christ's priestly intercessory prayer provides us with several benefits: (1) it communicates to us the power and merit of His sacrifice, for the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life; (2) it gives us strength and power to overcome sin and the temptations of Satan; (3) it preserves us in God's grace; and (4) it brings our prayers to God. Overall, according to Luther, the priesthood of Christ affirms that our salvation is not based on our works, and that this priestly work is the source of our comfort and hope.

Second, Luther's understanding of Christ's priesthood is foundational for his concept of the priesthood of all believers. Actually, the priesthood of Christ is the source of the existence of the Christian priesthood of all believers. Because all Christians are born in Christ's kingdom through baptism, as children of the Priest they are also priests. In addition, the Christian priesthood follows the same functional structure of Christ's priesthood. Based on the priesthood of Christ, the priesthood of all believers consists of preaching the Word, praying for the congregation, and spiritually sacrificing themselves before God.

Third, Luther's conception of Christ's priesthood seems to be his main argument against the Catholic view of a twofold participation in the priesthood of Christ. In effect, the conception of an ordained priesthood above the lay priesthood implies that Christ's priesthood is in fact performed through the ordained priesthood, based on the concept of apostolic succession. Since Luther believes that Christ's priestly work takes place primarily in



heaven, and not through an ecclesiastical structure, there is no distinction between two types of priesthood in the church, which means that there is no place for the concept of apostolic succession. As a result, based on the priesthood of Christ, all Christians are priests.

In short, this discussion reveals a basic distinction between the Protestant and the Catholic understanding of Christology and ecclesiology. As Norman Gulley indicates, “Catholic theology identifies the church and Christ, for the church is alleged to be literally the ‘body of Christ’ instead of metaphorically, as in Protestant theology” (GULLEY, 2009, p. 145). Therefore, Christ as “priest, and king cannot be confined within a church (as in Roman theology) because He is the head of the church (Ephes 5:23)” (GULLEY, 2009, p. 145; see also SAUCY, 2000, p. 193-212).

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