

Reaction to President Mark Zarling's Essay
Luther and the Saints:
The Priesthood of All Believers - A True Treasure of the Lutheran Reformation

A pastor accepts a call away from his congregation. Now there is a vacancy, and vacancies aren't easily filled these days. A year passes. Another year. Still no pastor. Will the congregation be ok? It's not a matter of how talented or beloved their former pastor was. It's not a matter of how talented or dedicated the people are, either. The crux of the matter is how well the people understand and believe in *the priesthood of all believers*. Even in congregations with a full staff, this doctrine deserves more attention than a bullet point mention in a Bible Information Class lesson on *Church*. Quoting August Pieper, Pastor Zarling calls this teaching *the treasure of the Reformation*.

After inviting his readers to let the relevant *sedes doctrinae* dwell richly in them, Pastor Zarling helps us see how this teaching played out in Luther's thinking and teaching. He points out that when speaking of Christ's office Luther used the term *priest* in a way that also included the office of prophet and king. He declares that *baptism unites us to Jesus so that he graciously declares us priests and kings and prophets* (8). Not only for Christ but also for the Christian, these three roles really comprise one office (10). This is more than a matter of semantics. Though the roles connected to the office are rich and varied, there is one office, one Christ, one source of gospel comfort for each of us.

Pastor Zarling doesn't hesitate to proclaim this comfort to his readers: *Oh, how Satan seeks to cover our eyes so we don't see the nameplates the Lord Jesus has attached to our hearts through baptism... Believe what God says you are, not what you think or feel about yourself!* (11) Then Pastor Zarling unpacks the *so what?* of this new identity with gospel encouragement and scriptural examples of what it looks like to live like prophets, priests, and kings. To demonstrate the timelessness of this teaching, he draws his examples entirely from the Old Testament, starting with one of the most ancient of believers, Abel, of whom he says: *The Spirit moved an individual to take of his vocational labors and act as a priest, coming to the Lord dressed in his promises and bringing a thank-offering to reflect the heart's gratitude. In so doing, he sent a powerful sermon to his brother, a sermon that ignited hostility, which is always the case in the heart of natural man* (13).

In the section titled *The Rejected Treasure Recovered*, Pastor Zarling helps us better appreciate the fresh air of sound teaching by holding it next to the diesel-laced smog of heresy that permeated the church of Luther's day. There was no priesthood of believers, only a priesthood of priests, and the papacy was hiding their heresy behind a seemingly impenetrable power structure. Pastor Zarling leads us to view Luther's 1520 treatise *To the Christian Nobility* from the perspective of its original readers: *Understanding the truth of justification and the power of baptism underscores the truth - radical for the time - that the Christian laity in their status before God are equal to the clergy* (18). With Scripture as his instrument, Luther tore down the wall between clergy and laity. He also recast the ecclesiastical use of the word *power* in gospel terms: *Through canon law the Romanists have almost destroyed and made unknown the wondrous grace and authority (emphasis mine) of baptism and justification* (Luther, *To the Christian Nobility*, 128, quoted by Zarling, 18). In view of this piece of history the reader can't help but ponder what seemingly insurmountable obstacles the Lord will overcome through the proclamation of the gospel in our time.

In the section titled *The Road to Recovering the Treasure and Beyond*, Pastor Zarling traces a line from *the Spirit's gracious omnipotence* in Luther's study of Scripture (20), to Luther's disenchantment with scholasticism (20,21), to the Ninety-Five theses (21), to the Leipzig Debate (22), to *Exsurge Domine* (22), to Luther's great treatises of 1520 (22), to his *Concerning the Ministry* of 1523 (23,24), and to his dealings with the Anabaptists (26). One could say that these events tell the story of how Luther uncovered and proclaimed the three *solas* of the Reformation. Pastor Zarling's unifying thread, however, is the *priesthood of believers*, and he explains how both perspectives on the Reformation fit together: *One might say that the message of the pure gospel is the efficient cause of the Reformation, whereas this question of the authority in the church is the formal cause* (22). In footnote number 78, he quotes Richard Caemmerer as saying: *The Lutheran Church likes to emphasize three principles as basic in the Christian religion: Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura. All three of these principles, however, practically express themselves in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers*" (23). There you go: a three-part outline for your upcoming Bible class on *The Priesthood of Believers*.

Helpful as both an example and encouragement, Pastor Zarling discusses the balance between the priesthood of believers and the public ministry. He points first of all to Luther's writings to emphasize that *all are priests, but for good order not all serve publicly* (25). Quoting Luther he says, *If we did not hold fast to and emphasize the call and commission, there would finally be no church* (26). The public ministry of the gospel is indeed a glorious thing, and public ministers of the gospel deserve the respect that accompanies their office. At the same time, Pastor Zarling, again drawing from Luther, points out that *the public ministry dare never overshadow the glory and far-reaching impact of the ministry of the priesthood of all believers* (26). What a joy and comfort there is in Pastor Zarling's reminder: *Christians are content in our vocations knowing that everything we do as a priest of God, dressed in Christ, is a labor in which our thank-offering brings joy to Jesus* (27)!

A person can't discuss Luther and the priesthood of believers without mentioning Luther's translation of Scripture into the German vernacular, or the way Luther encouraged fathers to teach the catechism *in the simplest way to those in his household*, or the way Luther put the words and music of liturgy and hymns into the hearts and mouths of lay people. In his essay, Pastor Zarling expresses his desire for more space to delve into these *Luther and the Saints*-flavored topics. Perhaps we can use the space that has already been established in the form of post-essay discussion to do just that.

In his concluding section, Pastor Zarling explores the ways the sinful flesh tries to rob us of this gospel treasure, this teaching on the *priesthood of believers*. What pastor can't relate to the pendulum diagram, which shows the way congregational members (including the pastor) may find themselves at one of two extremes, either apathy, or antipathy? How helpful and encouraging it is to remember just how important the doctrine of *the priesthood of believers* is in finding the Lutheran middle! Who among us can't relate to Caemmerer's observation that administrative growth can unintentionally impact the perspective of God's people so that they are hindered from seeing the treasure of the priesthood of all Christians (35)? How helpful it is to hear the encouragement to let the primitive Gospel work like leaven!

Certainly Pastor Zarling's practical suggestions for helping congregations reclaim the priesthood of all Christians will be widely appreciated. They deserve hearty discussion, perhaps more time than we can give here. I can imagine that his list of ideas would be good fodder for a circuit meeting discussion. As an example, consider again just this one statement among many in this section: *The use of the keys by the priesthood is basic law and gospel talk. Conflict management within our relationships is no longer an*

effort to squelch conflict and stoke the feel-good emotions. Nor is it the detective work to find out who is right and wrong. It is confession and absolution (37).

It is not beyond the realm of possibility even in our corner of the world, that a time may come when pastors will not be allowed to preach, and weekly church services will have to be replaced entirely by home devotions. God preserve us from such a day, but even if it comes, we have nothing to fear. Nobody will ever be able to silence God's Word from being proclaimed, and nothing will ever stop his royal priesthood from offering spiritual sacrifices to the Lord. But we don't have to wait until society crumbles to appreciate the treasures of the *priesthood*. Here and now, in our battle against the sinful flesh, it is wonderfully invigorating to breathe the gospel's fresh air. Thank you, Pastor Zarling for an essay that was both scholarly and engaging, both devotional and practical.

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