



THE PRIESTHOOD OF EVERY BELIEVER HOW LUTHER RECOVERED BIBLICAL PRIESTHOOD

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You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1Peter 2:5)

Paganism is the default religion of the human race. Without true, Biblical teaching we think like pagans. Many have rightly pointed out that Roman Catholicism is paganized Christianity. In that context, Luther fought to bring us back to the truth of the gospel as found in scripture alone. A concomitant teaching of scripture alone is the priesthood of every believer. Pagans typically wish to have a supposed holy man (or shaman) to stand between them and God, many Christians are looking for the same. False teachers and false prophets take advantage of this tendency to abuse the flock.

In Luther's day the abuse came from the Pope and the hierarchy of authorities under him. In that context, some Christians from Bohemia wrote to Luther to ask what to do. The Pope was making them send people to Rome at their own expense and pay tribute to have authorized "priests" to head churches.¹ Luther's answer was the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of every believer. He claimed that the Roman Catholic priesthood was illegitimate and comprised of the unregenerate. As such, they were not truly priests. Luther identified seven functions of priests, and proved from scripture that each of these legitimately pertained to every true saint, born from above.

Today the doctrine of the priesthood of every believer is typically neglected. The implications of the doctrine are not on the minds of many Christians. In this vacuum, religious authorities do what Roman Catholic

authorities did in Luther's day—they abuse the saints. In this article we will examine the seven functions identified by Luther along with his Biblical proof. I will argue that Luther's doctrine was indeed Biblical and needs to be brought back to the forefront of our preaching and teaching. If we are truly priests to God, we need to know the privileges and duties that attend this position we have in Christ.

Christ The One High Priest

The book of Hebrews identifies Christ as the perpetual high priest, "*being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek*" (Hebrews 5:10, see Psalm 110:4). This makes the Levitical priesthood obsolete (see the extended argument in Hebrews 7:4-22). Jesus is a "priest forever" and "ever lives to make intercession for us" (see Hebrews 7:24, 25). Jesus is identified as a merciful high priest whose one sacrifice put away sins (see Hebrews 9:26 and 10:12). The Bible clearly identifies Jesus as the high priest: "*Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people*" (Hebrews 2:17).

Unlike holy men who generally are inaccessible to most of their followers, Jesus gives us continual access to Himself. He is both king and priest as prophesied in Psalm 110. He paid for our sins, once for all, and sat down at the right hand of God. Not only does he

intercede for us, continually and perfectly, He gives each believer personal access to His throne: "*Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*" (Hebrews 4:16). This is not a throne of judgment where we would only go with fear and trepidation; it is a throne of grace where we are bidden to go with "*parresía*" which can be translated "boldness." In speech it implies, "freedom or frankness in speaking."² We can go directly to Christ and speak our needs to Him and not only does He hear us, he promises grace, mercy and timely help.

The implications of this are profound. We do not need the Pope and his prelates who claim some special anointing or superior piety. All believers have direct access to the throne room in heaven and find personal help from the king and perpetual high priest, Jesus Christ. Nor do we need others who claim superior religious status. There is one high priest, Christ, and we are all priests to God by His decree and promises.

The Church is Born of the Word

In defining ministers in the church, we must first understand where the church came from. Rome claimed to be the true church because of ancient history, tradition, creeds and councils. Luther claimed that the true church was not born of the traditions of men, but from the word of God. Here is how Luther described this:

This fact, however, constrains us and makes us sure, namely: that a real Christian knows that the church never ordains or institutes anything apart from the Word of God. Any church that does is no church

except in name only, as Christ says in John 10[:27, 5]: “My sheep hear my voice; they do not hear the voice of strangers, they flee before them; for they do not know the voice of strangers.” It is not God’s Word just because the church speaks it; rather, the church comes into being because God’s Word is spoken. The church does not constitute the Word, but is constituted by the Word.³

Peter shows us that what Luther said was true: “*for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God*” (1Peter 1:23). The aggregate of those born of God constitute the church.

Since the church is constituted by the word, its priesthood must also be defined by the word. We are not left in the dark about this. We have already established that Christ is the high priest over the whole church. The Bible teaches that all Christians are priests: “*you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*” (1Peter 2:5). We were built into this priesthood by Christ, not ordained into it by church authorities. As Luther taught,

For a priest, especially in the New Testament, was not made but was born. He was created, not ordained. He was born not indeed of flesh, but through a birth of the Spirit, by water and Spirit in the washing of regeneration [John 3:6f.; Titus 3:5f.]. Indeed, all Christians are priests, and all priests are Christians.⁴

This being the case, the Roman Catholic priesthood is illegitimate. Their claims are unbiblical. The church is born of the Word, and priests are born again by the Spirit.

Luther described what he identified in Scripture as the seven functions of priests:

Mostly the functions of a priest are these: to teach, to preach and proclaim the Word of God, to baptize, to consecrate or administer the Eucharist, to bind and loose sins, to pray for others, to sacrifice, and to judge of all doctrine and spirits. Certainly these are splendid and royal duties. But the first and foremost of all on which everything else depends, is the teaching of the Word of God.⁵

We shall examine each of these in light of the Bible.

The Ministry of the Word

The first of the seven functions of priests is the preaching of the Word of God. The Bohemians thought that if they had no priests ordained by Rome, then they would not have what was necessary. The Roman Catholic priests claimed to have sacraments that were essential. Luther rebukes them for this: “The mercenary papists who have intruded themselves ply their trade of consecrations, so that while the sacraments are here the Word does not exist in Bohemia. That is, they deprive you of essentials and lord it over you in nonessentials.”⁶ Since the church is born of the Word, the ministry of the Word is the most essential matter. We need the pure Word of God to be proclaimed by the church and to the church.

Claiming that Roman Catholic ordinations were wicked and impious, Luther urged that the public ministry of the Word be of foremost importance in the church:

Ordination indeed was first instituted on the authority of Scripture, and according to the example and decrees of the Apostle, in order to provide the people with ministers of the Word. The public ministry of the Word, I hold, by which the mysteries of God are made known, ought to be established

by holy ordination as the highest and greatest of the functions of the church, on which the whole power of the church depends, since the church is nothing without the Word and everything in it exists by virtue of the Word alone.⁷

These ministers are to be chosen from among the flock and be those who meet the qualifications laid out in the New Testament. Such elders are to be “apt to teach” (1Timothy 3:2). Luther claimed that the Roman Catholic ordinations were ungodly and should be rejected: “Henceforth neither seek nor receive ordinations from this son of perdition even if he offers them.”⁸

Since all true Christians are priests, they cannot be created by any ceremony, papal decree or religious pomp. Luther urged the Bohemians to provide for themselves presbyters that might serve the flock in a biblical manner. Here is a key point: “A priest is not identical with presbyter or minister—for one is born to be priest, one becomes a minister.” Rome’s bishops and priests he called “fraudulent” and the shaving and anointing that went with them to have been “introduced by human brashness and superstition.” Godly ministers will care for the flock and preach and teach the true gospel. Rome refused to do either. Elders are to be chosen who will fulfill their calling in a Christ honoring, godly manner.

However, all Christians, as priests to God, are given the privilege and responsibility of teaching. Luther correctly pointed out that those taught might only be one’s own family. But a father and mother teaching Christ to their family honor God and are a great blessing. There may be different audiences in God’s providence, but all Christians as priests to God can and should preach the Word. Luther saw this to be an implication of 1Peter 2:9, translating it much like this NRSV translation: “*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.*” Luther

translated, “declare the wonderful deeds of him [God].” All Christians are priests who are called and equipped to declare the mighty deeds of God. The word in the Greek is *arête*, which can mean “virtues” or “excellencies” as some English translations have it. In the Hebraic understanding, God’s mighty deeds reveal His virtues and character. God is praised for His mighty deeds.¹⁰ Luther is right, and all Christians are priests to God and are those who declare God’s mighty deeds. He states: “And Peter not only gives them [all Christians] the right, but the command, to declare the wonderful deeds of God, which certainly is nothing else than to preach the Word of God.”¹¹

Luther’s knowledge of the Bible and ability to draw out valid implications from it are often exemplary. For example, he correctly sees that the Lord’s Supper demonstrates that all Christians proclaim God’s mighty deeds. All Christians are commanded “do this” by Christ in regard to the Lord’s Supper. By obeying this statement of our Lord, we all preach the gospel. Luther said:

Even this remembrance is nothing else than a preaching of the Word, as Paul explains in 1 Cor. [11:26], “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” To proclaim the death of the Lord is to declare the wonderful deeds of God who called us from darkness into marvelous light.¹²

Indeed we proclaim the virtues of God in showing that Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, has paid the price for us unworthy sinners who have believed the gospel to dine with Him and thus proclaim His mighty deeds. We proclaim the only basis by which we know we will participate in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. The Lord’s Supper is a preview and reveals our eternal hope.

In what I consider another astute reading by Luther, he sees evidence in 1Corinthians 14 that all Christians as priests can and should teach.¹³ Luther

adduces this passage to support his claim: “For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted” (1Corinthians 14:31). Luther comments:

For say, what is meant by “each one of you”? And by “all”? Can this mean only the shorn? These passages very strongly and clearly corroborate that the ministry of the Word is the highest office in the church, that it is unique and belongs to all who are Christians, not only by right but by command. Indeed it is not a priesthood if it is not unique and common to all. Nothing can prevail against these divine thunderings, be it numberless fathers, innumerable councils, the custom of ages, or a majority of all the world.¹⁴

He also cited 1Corinthians 14:26 which has been misunderstood and misused by some to promote prophecy in the church as new revelations. Here is the passage: “What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification” (1Corinthians 14:26). Those who claim to be prophets with new revelations fail to take into account the range of meaning in Paul’s writings of the term “revelation.” For example, consider this: “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him” (Ephesians 1:17). This is part of Paul’s prayer for the Ephesian church that they gain wisdom that comes from implications of the gospel. Such revelation is not new or something beyond what was revealed to the apostles.¹⁵ We understand and encourage one another in implications of gospel truth which centers on the person and work of Christ. All Christians participate in this. So “revelation” in 1Corinthians 14:26 is of the same type as in Ephesians 1:17. These “revelations” are effectively doctrine,

and, as we will see later, Christians are also to judge doctrines in their priestly function.

Rome tried to silence any who would correct her errors and abuses. She claimed that her own prelates were authorized to teach and that ordinary Christians simply had to listen and obey. Luther explained that we are also prophets through Christ: “For just as through faith we are brothers of the Lord Christ, kings, and priests, so we are also all prophets through Christ. For we can all state what pertains to salvation, God’s glory, and a Christian life.”¹⁶ We have been given this privilege and responsibility by Christ and should not abdicate our duty because of threats from ecclesiastical authorities.

To Baptize

In this function, Luther cited the practice of Rome where “in cases of necessity” any Christian could baptize, including women.¹⁷ Since his Roman Catholic opponents granted this, Luther took his own strong view of baptism and used their practice as further evidence of the priesthood of every believer. Here is his logic:

Whether they wish or not we deduce from their own logic that all Christians, and they alone, even women, are priests, without tonsure and episcopal “character.” For in baptizing we proffer the life-giving Word of God, which renews souls and redeems from death and sins. To baptize is incomparably greater than to consecrate bread and wine, for it is the greatest office in the church—the proclamation of the Word of God. . . . The stupidity and senselessness of the papists here sufficiently reveals itself. 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.¹⁸

Luther did not use a lot of ink on this

point because he believed that the illogic of their position was enough to easily refute them. One did not need to be an episcopal authority to baptize, which they admitted by their allowing for special situations where any Christian could.

The Bible does not limit the practice of baptism to church authorities. I believe that baptism is a means of grace in that it reminds us that we died with Christ and have resurrection life. It is a visible representation of the gospel and something for us to remember. Paul here cites baptism as something that we should consider the implications of: “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?” (Romans 6:3). Though it is often the case that elders baptize people who come to faith, it is something any believer could do. Paul shows that *who* baptized us is not an important issue (see 1Corinthians 1:13-16). So this function is legitimately part of the priesthood of every believer.

To Administer Communion

The Roman Catholic authorities make one of their strongest claims of special status and power in regard to the Lord’s Supper. They turned Christian communion into something that has no semblance to what Christ and His apostles taught. Jesus Christ ordained that we practice His supper: “And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19). “Do this” is in the imperative in the Greek. Paul reiterates that he received this from the Lord and delivered it to the church (1Corinthians 11:23, 24).¹⁹

Nowhere in the New Testament does it claim that one has to be a church authority to administer the Lord’s Supper. We are simply commanded to “do this.” All Christians are equal at the Lord’s table. Luther made the fact that this is for all emphatic and rebuked Rome:

But Christ spoke this word to all those then present and to

those who in the future would be at the table, to eat this bread and drink this cup. So it follows that what is given here is given to all. Those who oppose this have no foundation on which to stand, except the fathers, the councils, tradition, and that strongest article of their faith, namely, “We are many and thus we hold: therefore it is true.”²⁰

Christ said, “do this” and church authorities cannot say “you may not obey Christ unless you obey us first.” Councils and creeds cannot take authority over Christ Himself! We must say “no” to those who want us to disobey Christ on the ground of their man-made traditions! Unlike many today who rush to make ecumenical peace with Rome, Luther rebuked them in clear terms:

A woman can baptize and administer the Word of life, by which sin is taken away, eternal death abolished, the prince of the world cast out, heaven bestowed; in short by which the divine majesty pours itself forth through all the soul. Meanwhile this miracle-working priest changes the nature of the bread, but by no other or greater word or power, and it has no other effect than that it increases his awe and admiration before his own dignity and power. Is not this to make an elephant out of a fly? What wonder workers! In despising the power of the Word they make marvelous their own power.²¹

So another function of priests that Roman Catholicism claimed for its false priesthood is given by Christ to His whole church through the priesthood of every believer.

To Bind and To Loose

The fourth function, binding and loosing, is far more important than many

realize. As our first two issues of CIC showed, this is not about binding demons or spirits, but about declaring what is forbidden or permitted under Christ. What is binding for all of us under the New Covenant is what has been bound by Christ and His apostles. We have no power to loose what Christ has bound nor bind what Christ has loosed. His appointed apostles (the biblical ones) are those who practiced this. For example, they did binding and loosing at the Jerusalem counsel of Acts 15. The apostles determined that Gentile Christians were not bound to the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant (Acts 15:1-29).

After the completion of the New Testament, binding and loosing can be done by all Christians because it is grounded in what has been given in the Bible. Anyone can see what is forbidden or permitted by Christ and His apostles and make application of it. But here again Roman Catholicism claimed to have authority to bind and loose beyond anything legitimately derived from scripture. Luther rightly sees this and rebukes it:

It becomes indeed a binding of consciences, though falsely and deceitfully, for they bind when there is no reason for it, as in the case of prohibition of marriage and of certain foods, though both have the sanction of God’s creation. To absolve, again, among them means to take money for making dispensations in regard to their stipulations and false laws, so that they deceitfully forgive what they have falsely imposed on consciences.²²

So they made laws up as they went along, bound people to them, placed them under false guilt, and then made these oppressed people do whatever Rome required to gain release. These prelates took away valid Christian liberty and put unsuspecting people under religious bondage. In Luther’s day that meant making false laws and then making people pay to settle the penalty for

violating them. They thus were able to, “regulate the money pouches of all the earth.”²³

In Matthew 18:15-18 the whole church is involved in church discipline and thus binding and loosing. Since this is the case when people are excluded because of persistent sin, therefore the whole church has the use of the keys. Luther says, “this is to excommunicate, to bind, and to close the door of heaven.”²⁴ There is no valid ecclesiastical hierarchy that has the final authority of binding and loosing in regard to church discipline. The church has this.

Luther makes a key definition that relates this to the gospel:

To bind and to loose clearly is nothing else than to proclaim and to apply the gospel. For what is it to loose, if not to announce the forgiveness of sins before God? What is it to bind, except to withdraw the gospel and to declare the retention of sins? Whether they want to or not [they must concede] that the keys are an exercise of the ministry of the Word and belong to all Christians.²⁵

Those who come to Christ agree that He is the head of the church and that His teachings are binding. He has revealed the terms of forgiveness. When we preach the gospel we make clear the terms of entrance into the everlasting kingdom. Those who believe are “loosed” from Satan and have the forgiveness of sins. The declaration of these terms is given to the whole church. It is part of the priesthood of every believer. Luther showed that Rome abused the keys in this manner: “By their binding they despise the gospel and by their loosing they exalt their own traditions. They have lost both the authority and the use of the keys by their perverse and impious abuse.”²⁶

To Offer Sacrifice

The fifth function of priests that Rome claimed for herself is to sacrifice. Luther rejected the Roman Catholic mass

which claimed to be a valid, propitiatory sacrifice offered by Catholic priests according to prescribed ritual. He claimed that the one valid sacrifice was the sacrifice of one’s body to God that is also called a “sacrifice of praise.” This passage was given as proof: “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship” (**Romans 12:1**). This sacrifice is one offered by the priesthood of every believer: ‘brethren.’ This sacrifice is acceptable to God because Christ made us holy by His work of redemption. “Bodies” here probably refers to the whole person. This sacrifice is not confined to a prescribed ritual at prescribed times, but is expressed as “spiritual” (*logikos*) worship that consists of a whole, redeemed person living for God by faith. Christ’s “once for all” (Hebrews 7:27) offering of Himself paid the price to make us holy and our worship acceptable.

The Bohemians were intimidated by Rome into fearing that if they had no priests to do the Catholic “mass” then they would be failing God and left in sin. Luther rejected the mass as a valid sacrifice and comforted them with the blessed truth of the sacrifice of praise. He was right that when we present ourselves to God as taught in Romans 12:1 we all offer a sacrifice as part of the priesthood of every believer. Luther was very firm in his rejection of Rome’s version of sacrifice:

Therefore that which they boast of as a singular sacrifice is indeed a singular sacrifice of a singular priesthood, but of a kind in which no Christian could or should in any way wish to be a participant. He should, on the contrary, denounce such participation as idolatry and a most blasphemous abuse and pray to be as far removed as possible from a part in it, however ancient and universal they allege it to be.²⁷

1Peter 2:5 was also cited by Luther to prove all believers as priests offered

valid sacrifice to God: “you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Hebrews 13:15 calls our sacrifice “a sacrifice of praise.”

The doctrine of the priesthood of every believer is an essential New Testament teaching that must be taught in the church. Some have neglected this and as a result we hear of people going back to Rome. They no longer think that the truths of the Reformation are important. One time after writing about these matters I received a call from a man with whom I had gone to seminary. He let me know that he had rejected *sola scriptura* and had gone back to Rome, where he was perfectly happy. In this day of ecumenism, we need to keep in mind what Rome claims, and how they addressed Luther’s doctrine.

The Council of Trent included a defense of the mass which rejected Luther’s doctrine. Consider how they anathematized any who do not embrace their unbiblical teaching:

CANON III.—If any one saith, that the sacrifice of the mass is only a sacrifice of praise and of thanksgiving; or, that it is a bare commemoration of the sacrifice consummated on the cross, but not a propitiatory sacrifice; or, that it profits him only who receives; and that it ought not to be offered for the living and the dead for sins, pains, satisfactions, and other necessities; let him be anathema. (on the sacrifice of the mass)

Notice that their claim was that propitiatory sacrifices are being offered even for the dead. This means that “Christ alone” is rejected (who paid for all sins, once for all) and clearly “scripture alone” is rejected because the Book of Hebrews explicitly teaches Christ’s all sufficient sacrifice.

Please consider the profundity of the implications before us. Propitiation means the aversion of God’s wrath against sin. Rome claims that their mass

is propitiatory and must be offered again and again, even for the dead. Anyone who even dares say that Christ's once for all sacrifice satisfied God's wrath against sin forever for those who believe, is declared to be consigned to hell. Listen to what God's word says on this matter:

for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.
(Hebrews 9:26-28 NRSV)

Rome claims to have a liturgy that must be repeated over and over for propitiation, but it never decisively removes sin. Throughout their lives, those in bondage to Roman Catholicism have to keep going back. And then the process is needed even after death, or so they claim. Hebrews claims that Jesus made propitiation "once for all" and that the results are eternal: "*and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption*" (Hebrews 9:12). No wonder Luther's doctrine was so revolutionary. Do not worry; God's word is true, and the anathema of Trent is a lie.

To Pray For Others

Pagans uniformly have holy men who supposedly can mediate between the world of the spirits and their subjects. Those who think like pagans think that there are holy people in the church whose prayers will do some good, unlike the prayers of ordinary Christians. But the truth is that all Christians are priests to God and all can offer up prayers for themselves and others. As Luther points out, the Lord's Prayer was given to all Christians.²⁸ Luther reasons that

since all are commanded to pray, which is to go before God to make intercession, then, "all are equally commanded to function as priests."

This truth is rather straightforward but remains a good reminder. We all have access to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). We are all commanded to pray (1Thessalonians 5:17). Furthermore we are told to pray for one another: "*Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much*" (James 5:16). Therefore we are part of the priesthood of all believers and do not need a contrived, special priesthood like that of Roman Catholicism.

To Judge Doctrines

One of the most important, and often neglected, privileges and duties of the priesthood of all believers is to judge doctrines. This function was taken away by ecclesiastical powers who claim this function only for themselves. In so doing they kept millions of Christians in bondage for centuries. Even Protestants are wont to take this away from the church and claim it only for their own decrees and councils. This is not right. Scripture alone is God's inerrant and binding word, and teaching derived from Scripture is only binding if it is accurately and logically derived from the text. All preaching is doctrine. Preaching is also called "prophesying" in passages such as in 1Corinthians 14. Luther correctly identified it as such.

Luther cited this passage in his claim that the priesthood of every believer included judging doctrine:

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; (1Corinthians 14:29-31)

It is a mistake to think that this meant new Spirit-inspired revelations beyond

the teachings of Christ and His apostles.²⁹ Some have claimed that since the canon was not yet closed, Paul left it to Corinthians to fill in needed revelation with their own Spirit-inspired utterances. On the contrary, this involved preaching then judging whether what was said was in keeping with revealed truth that came from Paul or other apostles. That is how Luther understood it, and I believe he was right.

That the term "revelation" was used does not mean it must have been new revelation previously unknown to the church. To understand that there are other uses of the term in Paul's writings consider Ephesians 1:17, 18:

that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.

"Revelation" here means understanding gospel implications that are provided in Christ. The "hope of His calling" was written about by Paul. Christian teaching about this hope is doctrine that can rightly be called "revelation" because it concerns revealed truth and its various implications. If such doctrine is taught in the church, it can and must be judged. That is also how the term "revelation" is used in 1Corinthians 14.

Roman Catholicism claimed the right to teach, but forbade the members of the congregation to judge. This unbiblical practice was rightly rebuked by Luther based on the passage in 1Corinthians 14:31 which said that we could all prophesy one by one. Luther applies this:

What sense is there to this drunken prattle of the pope and his papists, though handed down over many generations: "We command, we earnestly direct, the Church of Rome is Mistress of the churches and

the articles of faith”? All right, let her sit and teach and be a mistress, yet here she is commanded to be silent, if a revelation is made to one sitting by. Not only she, but each of us, one by one, may prophesy, says Paul, a master and corrector even of Peter when he acted insincerely [Gal. 2:14ff.]. How much more ought we not then confidently judge the church of Rome. . . . We are not to be judged by this church lest we imperil our own salvation and be found to deny Christ.³⁰

Every believer can and must judge what anyone teaches in the name of Christ. This does not necessarily mean “judge to be wrong” but means to determine its veracity. Luther gives solid counsel:

For you will not be damned or saved by the teaching of another, be it true or false, but by your faith alone. Anyone may teach as he pleases, but what you believe is your responsibility whether it result in your peril or your benefit.³¹

This responsibility does not go away when church prelates say, “we have had the truth figured out centuries ago, just decide to believe whatever we teach.” Sadly, many people prefer it that way. They want to join something and be done with it. However, doing so will never make anyone immune from the day of judgment: “*He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day*” (John 12:48). It will be Christ’s word that serves as the ground of judgment, not traditions, authorities or councils. Nor will we be vindicated by claiming that it is impossible to know the truth. We must know the truth, and Christ claimed that if we do know it we will be set free (Jn 8:32).

Recovering the Truth

Though it may seem that the stakes were higher in Luther’s day, we would

be foolish to think that nothing important is at stake today. Everything is, including the gospel itself. Christ paid the price to make all His disciples priests to God. If we were to abdicate this duty and decide to let religious authorities do everything for us, we would insult Christ who made us priests. Please consider this beautiful doxology:

and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Revelation 1:5, 6)

He literally “loosed” us from our sins and made us a kingdom of priests to God. Can we opt out of this without rejecting the One who paid with His blood for us to be His priests? No! As we say, “it goes with the territory.”

Luther’s words ring as true today as when he wrote them:

With what fear and trembling bishops and councils would have spoken and issued decrees, if the judgment of hearers would have had to be regarded when decisions were made with respect to priesthood, to the office of teaching, of baptizing, of consecrating, of sacrificing, of binding, of prayer, of judging doctrine. Indeed, there never would have been a universal papacy if this right of judgment had prevailed. They took good counsel when they monopolized this office!³²

Once they took away the priesthood of every believer and made unbiblical priests who functioned in unbiblical ways, the gospel itself was laid aside. The need to “protest” about this is as acute today. Many are not protesting even though they are called “protestants” because it suits their own purposes to keep the flock in the dark about

these things. Let’s get out of the dark and step into the light of the gospel!

End Notes

ⁱ Luther wrote: “When Satan got the upper hand and the bishops and priests (as they are called) deserted the Bohemian kingdom, leaving it devastated and isolated, the Roman bishops laid on you the hard and dire necessity of sending your clerics annually to Italy to purchase papal ordination.” (Luther’s Works Vol. 40).

ⁱⁱ Zodhiates, S. (2000). The complete word study dictionary: New Testament (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers

ⁱⁱⁱ (The Works of Luther Vol 36, page 147)

^{iv} The Works of Luther Vol. 40, page 19.

^v *ibid.* page 21.

^{vi} *ibid.* page 10.

^{vii} *Ibid.* page 11.

^{viii} *ibid.* page 17.

^{ix} *ibid.* 18.

^x 1Peter 2:9 alludes to Exodus 19:, Isaiah 43:21, and Isaiah 61:6.

^{xi} *Op. cit.* Luther vol 40, 22, 23

^{xii} *ibid.* 22.

^{xiii} In Issue 95 of CIC I show that prophecy in the church is bringing forth implications and applications of scripture, not making utterances that are supposedly directly inspired by personal revelation.

^{xiv} *Op. cit.* Luther vol. 40, 23.

^{xv} See CIC Issue 121 for a fuller discussion of revelation and spiritual gifts.

^{xvi} The Works of Luther Vol 30 page 165.

^{xvii} *Op. cit.* Luther vol 40, p, 23,

^{xviii} *ibid.*

^{xix} See CIC Issue 126 “Dining With the King” for an extensive treatment of the Lord’s Supper

^{xx} The Works of Luther Vol. 40 p. 24.

^{xxi} *ibid.* 25.

^{xxii} *ibid.* 25-26.

^{xxiii} *ibid.* 26.

^{xxiv} *ibid.* 27.

^{xxv} *ibid.* 27, 28.

^{xxvi} *ibid.* 28.

^{xxvii} *ibid.* 29.

²⁸ *ibid.* 30.

²⁹ see CIC Issue 95 The Prophetic Calling of Every Believer.

³⁰ *Op. cit.* Luther vol. 40, 32, 33.

³¹ *ibid.* 32.

³² *ibid.*

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