

Alfonso O. Espinosa, *The Priesthood Of All Believers*, PSWD Theological Convocation, May 16th, 2001

**The Doctrine Of The Priesthood Of All Believers
(Rev. Alfonso O. Espinosa, Panelist for PSWD 2001 Theological
Convocation, May 16th, 2001)**

I approach the question in context of theology and practice, as the two can never really be separated. On this doctrine, we are reminded that the Christian faith is not so much a collection of doctrines in the plural – as in the doctrines of demons referred to in 1 Timothy 4:1 -- as it is a body of doctrine (singular), the “parts” comprising an organic whole. In regards to the priesthood, there is no analysis that does not flow out from an overarching perspective of the Church and under this main heading of “Church,” priesthood and preaching office cannot be separated either. In whatever way one comes down on theology and practice of priesthood, the view of the preaching office will be directly affected.

Here, we are all immediately challenged. If any of us including myself, have an ax to grind or political agenda for a unique view of Church, preaching office, etc., then we will inevitably bleed our biases when it comes to priesthood. For example, if one is Grabau in spirit then the “Church’ [is] viewed as the visible aggregate composed of ministers, whose function [is] to instruct [our] parishioners and direct all church affairs, and laymen, [have the] duty...to hear and obey.” (Walther, *Church and Ministry (CTS abridgement)*, p. 48). Thanks be to God that Walther answered this perversion: *“The incumbents, then, of the ministerial office in the Church are for this reason also called in God’s Word not only servants and stewards of God, but also servants and stewards of the church, or congregation, and are thus represented as persons who administer, not their own, but the rights, authorities, possessions, treasures, and offices of the Church, hence are acting, not only in the name of Christ, but also in the name of and in the place of His bride, the Church of the believers.”* (ibid, pp. 77-78)

And I suppose that it is here in this context of “acting in place of” that we are most concerned with as we gather to consider the facet of the One Saving Faith called “the priesthood of all believers.” When shall pastors continue to act *in place of*? And when do the priests publicly express/enact what already has been conferred to them from heaven either when lacking a pastor or in seeking to assist the work of the preaching office already in place? Before I give practical examples of my practice, there are two important presuppositions to have sorted out:

First, there really *is* a distinction between priesthood and preaching office. Not only is this clearly taught in Scripture and our Confessions, but Luther blessed us in summarizing it via his royal family analogy: *“It is like ten brothers, all king’s sons and equal heirs, choosing one of themselves to rule the inheritance in the interests of all. In one sense they are all kings*

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and of equal power, and yet one of them is charged with the responsibility of ruling.” (LW 44, p. 128) And I think we all understand that when Luther speaks of “ruling,” he speaks of the public preaching of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments. These are the gifts given to all the priests; to all the kings and these kings choose – call – one to publicly distribute what belongs to them all.

Now if this is true – if the Scriptures, Confessions and Luther make such a distinction – why is it that we hear in some quarters of our Church the fusion of what ought be distinct. Where do we get this idea that pastors are called to “work themselves out of a job”? I think some would point out various interpretations of Ephesians 4:12. Do pastors equip the saints – the priesthood – for works of loving service (as expressed for example in Romans 12, offering themselves as living sacrifices, or in the activity described by Peter to proclaim the excellencies, or Christ’s description of being light to the world and salt to the earth – thus, not only are the priests ready to “give an answer for the reason” but are equipped to show Christ by feeding the hungry and visiting those who are sick) OR do pastors equip the priests for “ministry” not in the sense of what is related to the diaconate but in the sense of the preaching office?

This is where we are faced with the threat of functionalism. If everyone is a minister, then some ministers will stand in the pulpit (x), and other ministers will do y and z, and there is absolutely no reason why ministers cannot switch roles per the needs of a particular parish. But the Scriptures do not speak of such “roles,” they speak of “gifts” and among those gifts is “pastor and teacher” the ones who equip the priests.

So, the first presupposition to address is: Are we maintaining a distinction? If we aren’t, then we have assuredly left the Biblical teaching.

Secondly, what are we suggesting about the activity of the priests when they’re not serving as a lector, helping with evangelism calls or attending Bible Study? Are they less priests in the midst of their vocations? Is the mother who is home caring for her family in a less sanctified role as “royal/universal priest” when she is nursing, but especially holy when attending an LWML convention? Is the mechanic priest less priest when doing his vocation well as serving unto the Lord than when he is as elder reading his pastor’s sermon when pastor comes down with laryngitis? What are we suggesting about what priests do in vocation? Whatever it is, I hope and pray that it is never to suggest that true validation and expression of “priest” can only happen through the outward organization of the local parish. After all, the fundamental call of the priest is to tell God about their neighbors in prayer and to tell their

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neighbors about God in witness. If this simple concept were the burning desire of every priest, our congregations would be bursting at the seams.

Thus, if our preoccupation becomes how our priests can be busy in the organized parish with its committees, cell groups and boards, then we dishonor their call to be light and salt to the world, being put in places and being given opportunities that only the Holy Spirit can create. So the second presupposition to address is: Do we consider the families and vocations of the priesthood to be their “first service” so to speak? If we do not, then we are probably making more of our outward empires than we are the kingdom of God.

With these considerations in place, what is the emphasis in regards to the priesthood who attends the gatherings of the local parish?

- 1. Their first priority is to live in Hebrews 10:25, to gather together to be served by Christ through Word and Sacrament and in the process encourage one another as the Day approaches.**
- 2. They are to be equipped to have a burning thirst and desire for the Word of God – that it may dwell in their hearts richly – so that they are ready to witness and share the Word with all people. The Great Commission belongs to the royal priesthood, to the saints, to the Church.**
- 3. They are to reinforce the distinction between priesthood and preaching office. One way is that they will help perpetuate the practice of private confession and absolution and not allow it to go into disuse.**
- 4. They are to consider themselves equipped to serve also the practical needs of the community, especially the poor, hungry, destitute, those in prison, etc.**
- 5. They are to conduct the administration of the local congregation, especially so that the office of preaching and sacraments may prosper and hopefully guarantee that pastor does not become CEO.**
- 6. They are to assist the pastor in the administration of the divine services. My personal conviction and understanding of the pastoral epistles is not that only pastors may read the Scriptures in the public services, etc., but that the pastor oversees that all is done in good order and in this process, enjoys men and women, including young men and young women to serve in the divine service, as lectors, ushers, assisting in the prayers, etc. Since I consider the Sacrament to be directly associated with the public office of pastor, the communion assistants ought only be the elders in the congregation.**

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7. **The priesthood is active in Bible Study and that healthy congregations will strive to grow in this area when gifts of teaching and knowledge are made evident, so that the pastor is not necessarily the only one who teaches Bible Studies in the parish. For myself, I have a deaconess who teaches a weekly Bible Study for women, one EPCP vicar who assists with another, and two elders equipped to teach adult studies and who have several times in the past. Along these lines, I support the concept of our district's *Lay Leadership Training Program*. I know of one priest in my parish in particular who is not preparing for seminary, but who would make an excellent deacon, leading liturgy, teaching Bible Study and extending calls to our brothers and sisters in Christ.**
8. **That in light of James 5:16 and our Confessional standard of the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints, that the priesthood see themselves also as spiritual care-givers, equipped with both prayer and the Word to encourage one another, to share forgiveness and the counsel of the Holy Scriptures.**
9. **That the priesthood actively seek out their spiritual gifts especially in regards to how they themselves might serve the Church in other capacities. Last year, our congregation sent three church sons to the seminary. This year, we send a fourth church son to St. Louis and next year will send a fifth church son to Fort Wayne. In addition, this year, a second daughter of the congregation has been approved for the deaconess program at Concordia, Riverforest.**
10. **Finally, the priesthood helps to guard and rejoice in the foundational teaching that *"believers possess all spiritual gifts and blessings of God in Christ Jesus, so they possess also all temporal gifts and blessings of God, so that indeed all things present and things to come are theirs, 1 Cor. 3, 21-23, as children of God and coheirs with Christ, Rom. 8:14-17."* (Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 551)**

The peace of the Lord be with you always. Amen.