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Absolution and the Universal Priesthood: From Luther to Spener

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ABSOLUTION AND THE UNIVERSAL PRIESTHOOD

FROM LUTHER TO SPENER

By

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ABSOLUTION AND THE UNIVERSAL PRIESTHOOD
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This study traces the doctrines of absolution and of the universal priesthood and their interrelationship within the Lutheran tradition from Luther’s writings to the publication of Philip Spener’s *Pia Desideria* in 1675, setting this trajectory within the context of medieval discussions by such authors as Gratian, Lombard, and Aquinas.

Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood and its existence has been much debated. This study argues that the doctrine is evident through Luther’s career, albeit with varying relative prominence alongside his discussion of the public ministry. Key to Luther’s distinctive understanding is the responsibility of the universal priesthood to speak God’s Word to the neighbor. This is manifested particularly in the context of Luther’s new theology of absolution as the efficacious proclamation of the Gospel, which Luther consistently affirms can be announced by lay Christians, at least in private or in the case of emergency.

Subsequent Lutheran theologians in the period of confessionalization and orthodoxy tend to place less emphasis on the universal priesthood and the possibility of
traced through selected writings of Melanchthon, Flacius, Chemnitz, Chytraeus, Hunnius, Gerhard, Arndt and Dannhauer as well as church orders and hymnody.

The emergence of Pietism transforms the discussion of these topics. Spener, as part of his claim to be returning the Lutheran church to its roots, gave the universal priesthood a practical emphasis it had rarely received since Luther. Nonetheless, Spener’s radically different theology of penitence and absolution gave the universal priesthood a theologically reduced role. This reappraisal of Spener’s relationship to Luther and the Lutheran theological tradition raises broader questions of Protestant continuity and suggests the recovery of a robust theology of absolution and the Word as a necessary part of the discussion and practice of the universal priesthood in emerging churches and contemporary Christianity worldwide.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Problem and Its Setting

For Christians in the medieval West, hearing confession and speaking words of absolution were almost exclusively the right and responsibility of ordained priests. Luther’s rejection of the theological distinction between the spiritual and temporal estate challenged this exclusivity: “It is pure invention,” he wrote, “that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lord, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate.” Luther enlarged on this in several of his Reformation treatises of 1520.1

All baptized Christians were a part of the spiritual estate and considered priests. As priests they had the rights and responsibilities of priests. While it is true that Luther held that public preaching and administration of the sacraments should be handled through the office of ministry for the sake of order, confession and absolution were a special case. All Christians had the authority and responsibility to declare forgiveness of sins to one another, for all Christians possess “all the blessings of the Gospel.”2 The proclamation of the Gospel of God’s forgiveness was a central responsibility of every

1 Among them are Martin Luther, Eyn Sermon von dem newen Testament. Das ist von der heylige Messe (1520), WA 6:353 (LW 35:75-112); De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae (1520), WA 6:497-573 (LW 36:3-126); An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung (1520), WA 6:404-489 (LW 44:115-219); and Tractatus de Libertate Christiana (1520), WA 7:49-73 (LW 31:327-378).

2 Bernard Lohse, The Theology of Martin Luther (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 290.
believer. Despite changing contexts Luther held to this position throughout his life and ministry.

A century and a half after Luther, the Pietists believed they were doing nothing less than continuing the work Luther started. They believed it had been derailed by Lutheran Orthodoxy. The Pietist writer Philip Spener (1635-1705) continued to develop Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood through his concept of the *collegia pietatis*: gatherings of laypeople for the purpose of Bible study, prayer, and hymn singing. The *collegia* did not function in opposition to the clergy, but was intended to extend the clergy’s ministry of preaching. The *collegia*, much like Luther’s concept of the universal priesthood, had priestly responsibilities—these included hearing confession and providing words of absolution. Absolution, though, meant something quite different to the Pietists than to Luther. The Pietists’ shifted their understanding of the nature of absolution far from Luther’s. This shift had theological significance for the universal priesthood and absolution.

This study investigates the changes in the doctrine of the universal priesthood and absolution from Luther’s death in 1546 to the publication of Philip Spener’s *Pia Desideria* in 1675.

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4 Ibid., 73.

5 Ibid.
Significance of the Study

Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood (sometimes discussed under the epithet of the “priesthood of all believers”) has received significant attention. Paul Althaus’s systematic treatment of Luther’s thought in his study *Communio Sanctorum; die Gemeinde im Lutherischen Kirchegendanken* makes two things clear.\(^6\) First, the universal priesthood is based on faith alone. Every baptized person in Christ is considered part of the spiritual estate. Second, the tasks of the priesthood are extended to all baptized believers. Baptized Christians had the responsibility of hearing confession, speaking words of absolution, and preaching the Word. The development of the universal priesthood was partnered with the development of a divinely instituted office of ministry. This office was a matter of public order and not spiritual hierarchy.\(^7\)

A few studies have specifically addressed the relationship between absolution and the universal priesthood in Luther’s thought.\(^8\) John Bossy’s “The Social History of

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Confession in the Age of the Reformation\textsuperscript{9} points out that Luther particularly emphasizes and encourages laypeople to hear confession and speak words of absolution. As a matter of order, only those in the office of ministry should be responsible for public preaching, administrating the lord’s supper, and baptism. Nevertheless Luther repeatedly identifies providing absolution as the task of all believers, regardless of their office.\textsuperscript{10} He also emphasized the central place of the word of God in the absolution.

The role of confession in Christian life was significant in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. The importance of confession and absolution on the eve of the Reformation has been widely studied and debated. Steven Ozment has argued that the late medieval penitential system created a complex and pervasive system of fear, focusing too much on guilt and too little on consolation.\textsuperscript{11} This “system of fear” contributed to the appeal and spread of the reform as laypeople looked for relief from their current religious setting. Lawrence Duggan counters Ozment’s study, arguing that confession did not bring about the “oppressive anxieties” that Ozment claims. Confession was not as widespread or as important in lay Christian life as Ozment says.\textsuperscript{12}

Thomas Tentler’s study of confession on the eve of the Reformation provides an excellent introduction to the theological and practical aspects of confession and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Martin Luther, \textit{Eine Kurze Unterweisung, wie man beichten soll}, WA 2:57-66 (LW 53:116-118).
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Steven Ozment, \textit{Reformation in the Cities: The Appeal of Protestantism to Sixteenth Century Germany and Switzerland} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).
\end{itemize}
absolution leading up to Luther’s time.\textsuperscript{13} Like Ozment, Tentler finds the medieval penitential system harsh, but he is more restrained in his conclusions. Throughout all these studies one fact is clear: providing absolution was almost exclusively the task of the ordained priest. Lay absolution could be effectual, but only in extreme cases where a priest was unavailable.\textsuperscript{14} Absolution was dependent on the ordained character of the priest and the contrition of the penitent.

Lutheran Orthodoxy takes a divergent path on the universal priesthood and absolution. Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood became codified as Lutheranism consolidated its confessional and political base.\textsuperscript{15} Theologians after Luther continued to discuss the universal priesthood: Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560), David Chytraeus (1530-1600), Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), and Johann Arndt (1555-1621) all explicitly included the universal priesthood in their theological writings or invoked it as a premise of their theology.\textsuperscript{16}

As the universal priesthood became codified in Lutheran theology, the character and nature of absolution began to change. For Luther and other first-generation Reformers, the emphasis in absolution was on the assurance and comfort of God’s


\textsuperscript{15} See Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, \textit{Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelischen-lutherischen Kirche}, 12th ed (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1998), hereafter referred to as “BekS”; and Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., \textit{The Book of Concord} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), hereafter referred to as “BoC.”

\textsuperscript{16} All of their significant works will be examined in detail in chap. 5.
forgiveness. The penitent’s level of contrition, complete knowledge of one’s sins, and even correct theological knowledge of God were not emphasized as central. Absolution was given because of God’s love, not because of the character of the confession itself: everything depended on the work of the word of God. Later generations of Lutherans began to shift the importance from the efficacy of God’s work to the “fervent devotion” or effort of the penitent. This shift is seen beginning in such writers as Stephan Praetorius (1536-1603) and Philipp Nicholai (1556-1608). This emphasis on personal piety as the core of confession displaced the earlier emphasis on the external Word of absolution and its proclamation by the neighbor.

Spener was deeply moved and influenced by the works of Praetorius and Arndt. He desired a renewal of true Lutheran theology based on this emphasis on personal piety and inward transformation. In his seminal Pietist work, *Pia Desideria*, he lays out his vision by giving six recommendations for the church. His second recommendation is an expanded emphasis on the doctrine of the universal priesthood and the responsibilities “implied in that doctrine.” Although he emphasizes the universal priesthood and its responsibilities, he does not mention absolution among them. Spener does mention absolution in *Pia Desideria*, but here it neither forms a central part of his theology nor


18 I Philip Melanchthon, *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, BekS 190 (BoC 203, 93-97).


20 Ibid., 196.

fills the role of providing comfort and confidence as it did in Luther. He also expands on the role of confession and absolution in the *Beichstuhl* controversy. Here he emphasizes the importance of confession, both public and private, and absolution accordingly. Absolution takes on a much more important role in this situation.22

While Luther and Spener both hold the doctrine of the universal priesthood and absolution as important aspects of their theology, the contrast comes in content of their doctrine. First, Spener’s emphasis on interior spiritual growth moves the basis for absolution away from the word of God to individual effort. This is something Luther squarely objects to. Second, now that absolution was individually based, there was no need for lay absolution: a person with their own individual relationships with God accomplished it. Numerous studies have been on the universal priesthood and absolution in Luther and Spener separately; there are no studies that address the key differences above and how they developed. This study seeks to fill that void.

Two questions will be answered in this study. First, how does the nature of absolution change from Luther to Spener? Second, how did that change affect the doctrine of the universal priesthood? I argue that the change in the nature of absolution in Spener leads to a radically different understanding of both the absolution and the universal priesthood. These facts will be laid out through the course of the study. It is my argument that at the end of the study Spener cannot be a faithful carrier of Lutheran doctrine relative to the universal priesthood.

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Sources of the Study

This study examines specific primary sources from the late fifteenth to the late seventeenth centuries across a range of genres. Each source will provide insight into the changing importance of the universal priesthood and its relationship to confession.

Sermons

The study looks at sermons on specific biblical passages that address the universal priesthood and absolution or are applied to them. These sermons provide us with insight into how pastors in the Lutheran church understood and instructed their congregations on confession and absolution. Sermons written by Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560), Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), Philipp Spener (1635-1705), and others are surveyed here.

Loci Theologici or Loci Communes

Loci are collections of theological questions or topics that provide the basis for theological thought. Starting with Philipp Melanchthon in 1521, Lutheran pastors and scholars composed loci to systematize Lutheran theology and standardize practice. These loci provide us with insight into the intellectual development of Lutheran theologians on the subject of the universal priesthood and absolution. This study includes the Loci by

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23 Mark 18:15-20; John 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:9; Psalm 110. [NIV]

Melanchthon (1521 and 1543 edition), Martin Chemnitz (1591 edition), and Johann Gerhard (1610 edition) (1582-1637).²⁵

**Hymnody**

Hymns show how theology is presented at the popular level. The development of hymns from Luther through the late seventeenth century shows the changing importance assigned to confession in the everyday religious life of the believer. The study will sample hymns from two hymn-writers, Nicholas Herman and Johann Heerman.²⁶

**Church Orders**

Church orders (*Kirchenordnungen*) illuminate the organization and official practice of the newly established Lutheran churches. The orders reflect the development of doctrine as well as its practical implementation. This study samples the church orders of Wittenberg, Torgau, and Magdeburg. These were chosen for the emphasis they put on the universal priesthood and absolution.²⁷ The changes in liturgical forms over the period are elucidated in the classic study of Paul Graff.²⁸

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²⁷ The church orders are edited in Emil Sehling, *Die Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhundert*, 14 vols. (Leipzig and Tübingen, 1902–).
Confessors’ Handbooks

Confessor handbooks or manuals were written for pastors to instruct them on theology and religious practice. In this study the sections on the lay activity and absolution are the most applicable. These texts provide further information about how the theology and practice of confession and absolution changed over time. The study will sample late medieval handbooks and post-Reformation pastoral manuals.29

Catechetical Literature

Like sermons, catechisms and attendant catechetical literature give us insight into how confession and absolution were taught and applied in the life of the church. Catechisms and expositions by Luther, Chemnitz, David Chytraeus (1530-1600), and Spener are examined here.30

28 Paul Graff, Geschichte der Auflösung der alten gottesdienstlichen Formen in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands bis zum Eintritt der Aufklärung und des Rationalismus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921).

29 Martin Luther, Ein Kurtze weise zu beichten für die einfeltigen, dem Priester (A Short Order of Confession Before the priest for the Common Man) (1529), WAI 343-345 (LW 53, 116-118); Martin Luther, Wie man die Einfeltigen sol leren Beichten (How One Should Teach Common Folk to Shrive Themselves)(1531), WAI 383-387 (LW 53-119-121); Philip Spener, Geistliche; Johann Gerhard, Scholaas Pietatis (School of Piety). trans. Elmer Hohle (Malone: Repristination, 2006).

Devotional Material and Other Significant Writings

Pietism introduced new genres of devotional literature. These writings will provide a holistic picture of the devotional life of the seventeenth century, especially on absolution and the universal priesthood. The study will sample devotional works like *Pia Desideria.*

Method of Investigation

The study proceeds chronologically through the Middle Ages (particularly on the eve of the Reformation), the Reformation, the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy, and finally Pietism. The study will trace the development of the relationship between absolution and the universal priesthood. The sources outlined above will permit an exploration not only of theological development but also the application of both doctrines in institutional practice and popular pedagogy.

The study is attentive to connections and divergences in concepts across linguistic lines—particularly between the Latin of learned theological discourse and the German vernacular of popular preaching and devotion. For example, when Luther uses the German *Beicht* (“confession”), does he have the same meaning in mind as Melanchthon does when he uses *confessio* in Latin? Shifts in the meaning and use of the same terms over time are also a central concern of this study. By the time Spener was writing in 1675 did *Buß* have the same sense as it did in Luther’s writing or in late medieval confessional handbooks or had its meaning changed over time?

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I will examine other various challenges. Context provides difficulty alongside linguistics. When studying the early modern period, one cannot separate politics from religion or religion from social development. Luther’s setting is not identical with that of the older Melanchthon, to say nothing of Arndt or Spener. The development of doctrine is subject to each individual’s context.

The danger of anachronism is also a challenge. The study must be guided by the contextual analysis of what Luther and Spener thought and believed about the importance of the priesthood of all believers and confession, not by modern confessional interests. The debate between Ozment and Duggan over late medieval penitential practice may serve as a model. I will be looking at similar studies throughout the study.

The second chapter examines the origins of the universal priesthood. I will examine the biblical, early church, and medieval development of the universal priesthood; Tertullian, Gratian, and Aquinas among others will be examined. I will also present a historiography of Luther research on the universal priesthood. These two pieces will help to place the study in context. This chapter will help to lay the groundwork for understanding Luther’s inheritance of the universal priesthood.

The third chapter examines Luther’s development of the universal priesthood. The study will examine Luther’s primary texts so to hear his own voice. Alongside Luther’s own voice I will incorporate other modern voices to help frame Luther’s understanding of the doctrine. Unlike the early church and the Middle Ages, Luther expands on the doctrine and makes it a central aspect of his theology. One cannot look at Luther’s theology without seeing the universal priesthood at the front of it. I will
concretely lay out Luther’s own development of the universal priesthood to both build on
his inheritance from chapter two and his understanding from absolution in chapter four.

The fourth chapter focuses on Luther’s understanding of absolution and the
universal priesthood, tracing both continuities and radical changes. Absolution retained
its importance even as the Lutheran emphasis moved from human contrition to God’s
promise. The hearing confession and speaking absolution became the calling of every
believer. This was unique, however, as the other priestly duties (baptism, public
preaching, Lord’s Supper) were only to be done by those who had been called to the
public ministry (Predigtamt). Luther identified the job of providing absolution as a
central defining factor of the universal priesthood. The place of absolution and the
universal priesthood will continue to build my argument.

The fifth chapter examines the relationship between absolution and the universal
priesthood during Lutheran confessionalization and Orthodoxy, from circa 1550 to 1650.
The codification of Lutheran doctrine began to change both doctrines. At the same time,
the treatment of absolution shifted. Significant figures from the period of Lutheran
confessionalization, such as Philipp Melanchthon, Martin Chemnitz, and David
Chytraeus, demonstrate the initial phase of this development. The chapter also looks at
significant figures from the development of Lutheran Orthodoxy such as Johann Arndt
and Aegidius Hunnius. I will examine sermons, hymns, church orders, and theological
works from these figures. The doctrine of the universal priesthood took a step back
during this time as well as the practice of lay absolution. The codification of Lutheran
define pushed the doctrines to the background in favor of rigorous theological
agreement among all Lutherans. Nevertheless, the universal priesthood survived through
individuals like Arndt and Dannhauer. This continuity between Luther, Arndt, and Dannhauer allows Spener to inherit Luther’s doctrine. This connection will allow my argument to build further as we move from Luther to Spener.

The sixth chapter is dedicated to a close look at the relationship between absolution and the universal priesthood in the thought and writings of Philipp Spener. Spener saw himself as an inheritor of the Lutheran tradition. He believed he was continuing on the work that Luther started. While standing within the Lutheran tradition and emphasizing the priesthood of all believers, he differs substantially from Luther on the issue of confession and the nature of absolution. His significant devotional as well as sermons will be examined in this chapter. I will propose that Spener’s understanding of absolution fundamentally changed and consequently this changed his understanding of the universal priesthood. This change removed him from the claim of carrying on the Lutheran tradition.

The seventh and final chapter summarizes the research and provides concluding thoughts and questions. I will present a brief restatement of my historical-theological argument and review the steps that help me reach this conclusion. The paper will then address further trajectories for research. Lastly, the chapter will end with the application of the findings here for contemporary church life.

Definitions

There are numerous terms or phrases that could be problematic in the course of the study. To avoid confusion, pertinent terms or phrases need to be defined here. Definitions reflect their meanings within the context of the sixteenth century.
Penance (Geman, Busse; Latin, poenitentia).

Penance generally has three overlapping meanings in religious thought and practice. The first, usually translated as “repentance” and identified with contrition, “implies sorrow for sin and the intention to amend.” Second, it refers to the penitential activities (primarily prayer, fasting, and almsgiving) voluntarily undertaken on one’s own or at the direction of a confessor as satisfaction for a temporal punishment owed for sin. Third, the word in medieval and Roman Catholic usage refers principally to the sacrament of penance itself. This meaning encompasses the first two, but adds private confession and absolution of sin to a priest. This last usage will be the one that this study will chiefly use as I trace the significant shifts in emphasis over the period surveyed.

Confession (German, Beicht; Latin, confessio).

In the Christianity of the medieval West, private or auricular confession of sins was to be made to a priest. Ordination granted him power to absolve guilt, fix penances, and provide words of absolution. Confession was considered compulsory for participation in the Lord’s Supper, though it was not wholly enforced. Luther retained the practice of confession and absolution for the value it provided in building faith and trust in God and less for its disciplining value.


33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 2:242–44
Absolution (German, *Absolution, der Sündenerlaß* / *ledig sprechen*; Latin, *absolutio* / *absolvere*). Absolution was the goal or outcome of confession for the penitent. The confessor provided absolution or freedom from guilt and punishment for sin committed. This absolution was conditioned upon the performance of appropriate penance. Luther made two changes. First, absolution was not about guilt or punishment but a bare and direct declaration of the forgiveness and grace of God. Second, absolution had its power because it was the word of the gospel that could be proclaimed by anyone in the universal priesthood.35

Power of the key or Keys (German, *Schlüssel*; Latin, *potestas clavium* or *potestas ordinis*). The power of the keys is the power to remit or to retain sins. The ordained clergy of the church alone held juridical authority to exercise the power of the keys in medieval theology. Luther contended that the authority actually belonged to all Christians, including laypeople in the church.36

Universal priesthood of all believers (also referred to as priesthood of all believers or priesthood of the baptized; German, allgemeines priestertum; Latin, sacerdotium or communio sanctorum).

The doctrine of the universal priesthood was Luther’s response to the Roman Catholic doctrine of ordination. The universal priesthood eliminated the spiritual distinction between priests and laity. Luther rejected the sacramental character of ordination to the priesthood. All individuals who are baptized are therefore considered priests and have the same priestly responsibilities. This study refers to those who have been baptized as members of the universal priesthood.

Limitations

Several limitations will be imposed on the study. First, I will only examine the development of the universal priesthood and absolution through the year 1675, the year of Spener’s Pia Desideria publication. Second, I will focus solely on the development of confession and absolution in Germany. I will examine developments in England, Switzerland, France, and so on only to the extent that they shed light on the development in Germany. Third, I will address the development universal priesthood and absolution only within the emerging Lutheran tradition of the sixteenth century. I will examine others wings of the Protestant Reformation (Calvin, radical, etc.) and Catholic Counter-Reformation again only to the extent that they shed light on understanding the Lutheran tradition. Fourth, I will not examine Lutheran church records, court records, and so on. Rather, the study will focus on what was said about the universal priesthood and

37 Schaff Herzog Encyclopedia, s.v. “Universal Priesthood.”
absolution, not on variations in proclamation, implementation, and response at the popular level in local contexts.
CHAPTER TWO

ORIGINS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE UNIVERSAL PRIESTHOOD IN LUTHER

Introduction

Luther’s hermeneutical discovery, his Sprachereignis, allowed him to approach Scripture afresh.¹ This new approach emphasized the righteousness of God (alien righteousness, extra nos) as justification for sins instead of the righteousness earned through personal efforts. One must only put faith and trust in God through the word proclaiming Christ. As Luther described it, this discovery affected his whole reading of Scripture and his approach to life.²

Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood grew out of his doctrine of justification by faith alone. All were equally sinners and in need of salvation; and it was only through God’s work, not the work of individuals themselves, that one was truly saved. Contrary to the medieval division of Christians into the “spiritual” and the “temporal” estates the only distinction that Luther could find in Scripture was the distinction between the baptized and the unbaptized, those who were justified and those who were not. Once a person is baptized, for Luther, she is a part of the spiritual estate—with no distinction between clergy and laity:

It is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate are

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¹ For a summary of the debate over the timing and content of Luther’s discovery, see Bernard Lohse, The Theology of Martin Luther (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 85–88.

² Martin Luther, Tomus primus omnium operum (1545), WA 54:179–87 (LW 34:336-337).
called the temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and for this reason: all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 that we are all one body, yet every member has its own work by which it serves the others. This is because we all have one baptism, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, Gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people.³

Baptism confers the opportunity and responsibility of priesthood not as a bare ritual but because of its connection with God’s Word and with faith. “Baptism is not merely water,” Luther explained, “instead it is water enclosed in God’s command and connected with God’s word.”⁴ It is the faith that comes through with God’s word in baptism that provides “forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives salvation to all who believe it.”⁵ The universal priesthood is not simply the “objective” gift of baptism,⁶ but the gift given with and to faith. “He who does not believe is no priest.”⁷

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⁴ BekS 515 (BoC 359). “Die Taufe ist nicht allein schlecht Wasser, sonden, sie ist das Wasser, in Gottes Gebot gefasset und mit Gotes Wort verbunden.” “Baptismus non est simpliciter aqua, sed quae sit divino mandato inclusa et verbo Dei comprehensa.”

⁵ Ibid.


This chapter examines the origins and early development of Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood. In the first section, we will examine the historical development of the doctrine to get a clear idea of what Luther inherited. The goal of this section is to Luther did not create the doctrine of the universal priesthood *ex nihilo*; rather, it had a long-standing history even within the strongly articulated hierarchy of the church in the Middle Ages. The second section will present the historiography of Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood. The goal of this section is to provide a historical and theological basis for Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood. This setting will be built upon in chapter three.

The Historical Development of the Doctrine of the Universal Priesthood Before Luther

The phrase “Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood” is misleading if taken to imply that the doctrine found its genesis with Luther. The reality is that Luther inherited a doctrine that was rich in history and development. Church fathers as early as the second century were dealing with the question of authority in the church and the role of the lay Christian. Relying on Cyril Eastwood’s magisterial two-volume survey of the history of the universal priesthood, this section will first take a short look at the biblical, patristic, and early medieval contributions to the doctrine. Then the figures more

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immediately influential on Luther—Peter Lombard, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Gabriel Biel—will be examined more extensively. My goal is to lay out a detailed picture of what Luther inherited in his doctrine of the universal priesthood, even in its via negativa form. What we will find is that Luther inherits a great deal, he reworks much of his inheritance in light of the priority of the Gospel. The inheritance is turned upon its head.

Biblical Understanding: Old and New Testaments

The exegetical roots of the doctrine of the universal priesthood lie in God’s covenantal choosing of Israel. While Israel had a priestly class that performed communal priestly functions to God, each Israelite also had individual responsibility. God identifies the Israelite people as (and they understood themselves to be) a kingdom of priests [Exod. 19:6].

Within the New Testament, Jesus is described as both fulfilling and transforming both the narrower and broader priestly traditions. Drawing on Psalm 110, Christ is acclaimed as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek. In his death, Christ is both the communal sacrifice and the priest that offers that communal sacrifice. Christ can thus

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10 Eastwood makes three important observations: (1) Priesthood was the prerogative of the whole community, (2) each Israelite had private priestly duties, such as building altars and sacrificing, and (3) each Israelite was responsible for the spiritual welfare of the whole community.

11 Melchizedek was both the high priest and the king of the town of Salem, the ancient name of Jerusalem, as seen in Gen.14:18 (NIV; unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the NIV). See Heb. 9:11: “When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here . . .”; Heb 5:5–6;
be seen as the parallel to the high priest in the Old Testament. Jesus confers on his
disciples his priestly status and responsibilities.\(^\text{13}\) The disciples see themselves and also
their followers as having this priestly role, as evidenced by their own words in the New
Testament.\(^\text{14}\) Significantly, the distinctive language of priesthood is never used in the
New Testament texts to describe the leaders of Christian communities in particular. The
sacrificial system in the Old Testament is set aside as a type or foreshadowing with the
coming of Christ, his resurrection, and the conferring of priestly power upon all believers.

The change Christ brought thus dramatically affected the definition of the priestly
class. The parallel to Israel, the “people of God,” in the New Testament is the community
of those who confess Jesus as Christ—whether Jews or Gentiles. The “expansion” of the
Gospel message past the Jews to the Gentiles (non-Jews) allowed for anyone who had
faith to participate in the “royal priesthood” represented in Scripture.

**Early Church**

The third through the seventh centuries brought both the maturing of this nascent
faith as well as the development of doctrine of the universal priesthood. One of the

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“God said to him, ‘You are my son; today I have become your father.’ And he says in another place, ‘you
are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’” The author of Hebrews is here quoting Ps. 110:4.

\(^\text{12}\) For theories on Christ’s role as high priest and a historical study of Christian theological
significance of this typology, see Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: A Historical Study of the Three Main

\(^\text{13}\) Not surprisingly, there has been some debate about whether Christ conferred the power only on
those present (the Twelve, sans Judas) or on those who came after. Or if the apostles (the Twelve sans
Judas plus Paul) had a special status that was “discontinued” in the second generation of followers.

\(^\text{14}\) See 1 Pet. 2:9–10 [NIV]
challenges to this development during these centuries and well into the Middle Ages is language. While the concepts are constant, the language changes. At times the universal priesthood is referred to as the lay priesthood or just laypeople; the office of ministry can be referred to as spiritual orders, Orders, Divine order or the special priesthood. Each of these topics is directly related to developing his understanding of the universal priesthood. Keeping these changes in mind is important as we see the doctrine develop during this time.

Tertullian (d. 225) is an excellent example of the growing significance of the universal priesthood. While he was not the first to recognize it, he was the first to use some of the common language and themes for the doctrine: spiritual priesthood, the ability for laypeople to perform baptisms in the absence of a priest, and that ordination and succession from the apostles was not regarded as the authority of a true priest. Tertullian believed that the direct visitation of the Holy Spirit qualified a Christian to be a teacher or a minister. Since the Holy Spirit inhabits and sustains the church, the church is full of spiritual men that qualify as priests. In fact, Tertullian believed that laypeople, without spiritual orders (here a bishop) could constitute the church. This did not mean that there was no discipline. Tertullian believed that each layperson as a priest should also be subject to priestly discipline.

Clement of Rome (d. 99) and Clement of Alexandria (d. 216), on the basis of their reading of the New Testament, affirmed that all Christians were members of the priestly

15 Eastwood, 74.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 75.
class and were responsible for sacrifices (bloodless and spiritual) for the whole community.\textsuperscript{18} Clement of Alexandria expanded the doctrine by emphasizing that, by virtue of their position as priests, Christians were also mediators.\textsuperscript{19}

The distinction between the universal priesthood and the leadership of Christian communities was emphasized by Cyprian (d. 258). Rather than describing the whole church as high-priestly race that offered spiritual sacrifices, he conceived of bishops as a special priesthood that had a special sacrifice to offer. According to Cyprian, they were set apart from the general Christian population, even having unique power over it. While Cyprian was not actively attacking the doctrine of the universal priesthood per se, the cementing of the bishops’ power and the new understanding of the Lord’s Supper served to undermine it.\textsuperscript{20}

Nevertheless, the doctrine was revived in the fourth century under St. Augustine. Augustine (d. 430) provided the via media between the aforementioned Clements and Cyprian. He was able to affirm both the universal priesthood and the special priesthood without compromising either. For Augustine, the affirmation of the universal priesthood was based on the universal catholicity of the Gospel as well on the meaning and significance of baptism.\textsuperscript{21} Both of these suggested each Christian’s participation in the worldwide mission of preaching the forgiveness of sins. Gregory the Great (d. 604)

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \cite{T. M. Lindsey, The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903), 307; and Eastwood, Priesthood, 80.}
\item Eastwood, Priesthood, 71–73.
\item Ibid., 83.
\item Ibid., 94; and Augustine, City of God trans R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotes}
continued Augustine’s emphasis on the universal priesthood. The doctrine is manifested especially in the responsibility of all Christians to teach the “knowledge of God as a messenger of the Lord” and in the study of Scripture.²² Indeed, Gregory saw the study of Scripture, the possession of all believers, as the primary duty of all Christians.

Middle Ages

Despite Gregory’s emphasis on the doctrine, several other challenges affected its development.²³ The seventh-century rise of Islam uncovered a fundamental weakness in the church: that once the ecclesiastical hierarchy was compromised by the withdrawal of imperial support, the laypeople were ill-equipped to meet the theological challenge of Muslim teaching. Theological changes in the church, specifically iconoclasm, the Mass, and the penitential system, once again elevated the special over the universal priesthood.²⁴ Last, the growing battle between the church and state manifested itself in the lay investiture controversy of the eleventh century under Pope Gregory VII. This was meant to secure the spiritual integrity of the church but also drove a formidable wedge between the clergy and laity. Gregory’s insistence on a separate legal system for clergy further drove the two priesth100ods apart while elevating the special priesthood.

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²² Eastwood, Priesthood, 107; and Augustine as quoted in Eastwood, Letter to Dominicus 47.

²³ Cyril Eastwood proposes the interpretation, followed here, of four “great struggles” involving the priesthood of all believers: East vs. West, Islam vs. Christianity, priesthood vs. laity, and church vs. state.

²⁴ Ibid., 154.
High and Late Middle Ages

The scholastic theologians of the high Middle Ages sought to synthesize the patristic inheritance within the legal and theological framework shaped by the medieval papacy. Their treatments form a major part of the landscape for Luther and the early Reformation. This section will examine the contributions of some of the most prominent of these theologians, beginning with the seminal work of Gratian and Peter Lombard and continuing with the writings of Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Gabriel Biel.

Gratian and His “Decretum”

We have inherited much less knowledge of Gratian himself than we have of his influence on the development of theology and the church. The limited knowledge we have of Gratian, that he was a canon lawyer and lived in Bologna in the twelfth century, comes from his seminal work, Concordian discordantium canonum, more commonly referred to as the Decretum.

The Decretum is a work of both intellectual and ecclesial importance. Employing the scholastic method, Gratian set outs both to catalog and harmonize opinions and canons from the history of the church, including church fathers, papal statements, and biblical texts. Despite never having received official recognition by the church, Gratian’s work in the Decretum became the standard textbook for the historical study of canon law. The Decretum covers a myriad of topics from ecclesial power versus state

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power, the power of the priesthood, and the proper use and understanding of the sacraments.

The influence of the *Decretum* was not due solely to Gratian’s intellectual and ecclesial accomplishment, but also to the contemporaneous shift of the church’s claims to jurisdictional power at the beginning of the twelfth century, for which Gratian’s work was an indispensable aid. This congruence served to widen and deepen its impact.26

The portion of the *Decretum* most germane to this study is Gratian’s discussion of the sacraments. His view of baptism and its right use is of particular interest. These are found in his third part, fourth distinction, chapters 19–43. Not surprisingly, Gratian affirms that “no one except the priest should assume to baptize.”27 Further in the next chapter (perhaps with Augustine in mind), that women may not baptize.28 Nevertheless, in chapters 21 and 36, Gratian affirms that if necessary, a layperson may baptize if there is no *sacerdos* present, particularly in times of danger that causes a baptism to be necessary.29 Gratian expands and even allows that baptisms done by an unbeliever can be effectual and need not be repeated.30

We can see Gratian’s influence on Luther here in his willingness to allow for those who are not ordained and even not recognized as a Christian to baptize. He is not


28 *Decretum* 3.4.20. Ibid.


30 Gratian, *Decretum* 3.4.21: “Non reiteretur baptisma, quod a pagano ministratur.” Ibid.
proposing this as ideal, but it allows for the baptism to stand if it happens. Gratian affirms the ability and responsibility of the nonclergy (and consequently the power of God) without devaluing the office of ministry. Given the influence of Gratian’s writing into the Middle Ages and beyond, his allowance for baptisms by laypeople is significant.

Peter Lombard and the “Sentences”

Peter Lombard’s (c. 1095-1160) *Libri Quatuor Sententiarum*, or *Four Books of Sentences* (commonly known as the *Sentences*), became the standard textbook of theology at medieval universities for the next four centuries. All of the major medieval theologians, from Albert the Great, to Thomas Aquinas, to William of Ockham, to Gabriel Biel were influenced by it. Even Luther wrote glosses on the *Sentences* (1509–1510), and Calvin quotes from it over one hundred times in the *Institutes*.33

Imitating Gratian’s methodology and opinions in the *Decretum*, Lombard sought to detail systematically a summary of Christian doctrine. Each book is subdivided into *quaestiones* (questions), and under each of these Lombard presents the relevant biblical texts and opinions of church fathers and other authorities. Since there were contradictions and disagreements, Lombard endeavored to give his own opinion had no interest in


32 WA 9:28-94.


resolving the differences between the fathers. Lombard’s framework itself was the basis for the next four centuries of scholastic theology.

Among Lombard’s contributions for our purposes in tracing the doctrine of the universal priesthood is his discussion of the theology of penance. Lombard believes that the keys have two uses: the first is to discern who is to be bound and loosed; the second is the actual binding and loosing.\(^{35}\) The problem is that not all priests have access to the key of discernment. Plainly put, some priests do not know who should or should not be loosed or bound. This being the case, Lombard makes it clear that the penitent should choose his or her confessor carefully. In the event that a “competent” priest is unavailable, the penitent should seek out a layperson: “For one should seek out a priest of wisdom and discernment, who possesses good judgment along with the power of binding and loosing; should such a priest perchance be unavailable, one must confess to a companion.”\(^{36}\) There is no ability to be baptized by a companion or another Christians as baptism was given to priests alone.\(^{37}\)

*Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225)*

Though Aquinas looms over modern perceptions of medieval theology, for his contemporaries outside the Dominican order, he was one theologian (albeit an important one) among many. Alongside his *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, his


\(^{36}\) Peter Lombard, *Sententiae*, bk. 4, dist. 17, chap. 4, no. 6: “Quaerendus est enim sacerdos sapiens et discretus, qui cum potestate simul habet judicium; qui si fore defuerit, confiteri debet socio.”

commentary on Lombard’s *Sentences* (from which the Supplement to the Third Part of the *Summa Theologica* was arranged by his colleagues) formed his contribution and response to the medieval theological tradition.\(^{38}\)

Alongside his development of grace relative to salvation, Aquinas devotes a significant amount of time developing his understanding of the priesthood and the role of other Christians. According to Aquinas, God brings about the priesthood so that his actions could and would be knowable through people; these priests cooperate with God and bring God’s work to the church (sup. 3, q. 35, art. 1).\(^ {39}\) Contrary to seeing the priesthood (*ordo*) as ruling over the church, Aquinas sees it as a “remedy, not to one person but to the whole church” (sup. 3, q. 35, art. 1).\(^ {40}\) All in the church have received “sanctifying grace,” but those who are called to the order have received a greater gift. With this additional gift of grace, “they are rendered apt for greater things.”\(^ {41}\)

So while God gives grace to all baptized Christians, he gives a greater gift to those who are called to holy orders. There is a “character indelebilis” for the order that God gives, which can never be taken away (sup. 3, q. 35, art. 2).\(^ {42}\) This distinction is not merely for the benefit of those called but also for the service and benefit of those whom

\(^{38}\) Aquinas’ commentary on the *Sentences* can be found in *S. Thomas Aquinas Opera Omnia: ut sunt in Indice Thomistico, additis 61 scriptis ex aliis mediæ aevi auctoribus*. ed. Roberto Buso (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980). For Aquinas’ comments on Lombard’s thoughts on baptism see v.1, 446-447.

\(^{39}\) In-text references are to St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981), 2571.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
they serve. Aquinas is quite clear that baptism and penance belongs to these priestly orders (3a, q. 67, art. 3).\(^{43}\)

*Duns Scotus (b. ca. 1270)*

While Aquinas’s work is considered a high point of scholasticism, both Scotus’s critique and reworking of Aquinas’s theology represent an important mark in the historical development of the movement. They represent the distinctive contribution of a Franciscan theological tradition whose mediated influence on Luther is apparent.\(^{44}\)

Steven Ozment put it best: “Before Ockham turned his razor against Scotist and Thomist epistemology, Scotus applied a razor of his own to Thomastic soteriology.”\(^{45}\) In particular Scotus attacked Aquinas’s views on the infused habit of grace. Aquinas believed that grace was not a part of humanity as a substantial form but as an accidental form. In other words, grace is a part of humanity, but not as something that necessarily defines it; it is nonessential to its being: “Grace is not in the soul as its substance; neither is it there so as to be absolutely no part of it; it is really, but accidentally, there.”\(^{46}\)

Scotus was suspicious of the way God seemed to be bound to humanity in Aquinas’s doctrine. While Scotus believed that God infused prevenient grace, he did not believe that God was *required* to do so. “Nihil creatum formaliter est a deo acceptandum”

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 2297.


\(^{46}\) Ibid., 33.
(“Nothing created must, for reasons intrinsic to it, be accepted by God”); in other words, what was created and finite could in no way determine what was uncreated and infinite. He believed that Aquinas bound God too closely “to the church’s system of grace and tended to lose sight of the great distance that obtained between God’s eternal will and its execution in time through created orders and finite agents."47 Further still, Scotus was suspicious of defining Christians in terms of what they could possess as their own within their souls.48 For Scotus, only God’s will could be primary in the definition of Christian. “What God decreed in a man’s regard was far more important to his salvation than any quality of soul he might come to possess; people were saved only because God first willed it, never because they were intrinsically worth it.”49

This difference becomes important for our study in Scotus’s understanding of the sacraments. The grace that comes in the sacrament is not a matter of the sacraments themselves—they do not intrinsically contain grace. Rather, they are efficacious because of the covenant that God made, the fact that God has agreed to be present in the sacrament.50 The character that is endowed with the sacrament, particularly in ordination and baptism, is the same, but for Scotus it was because of God himself, not the sacrament. The grace given in baptism to a Christian and then the “extra” grace received

48 Ozment, Age, 33.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 35.
(or given by God) in ordination is not different, or rather, Scotus places the distinction in the will of God rather than in any quality inhering in the recipient.\footnote{Ibid.}

\textit{William of Ockham (ca. 1288-1347)}

As Scotus had reacted in correction to the flaws he perceived in Aquinas’s scholasticism, so Ockham sought to correct Scotus. While incorporating much from Scotus, he reacted strongly not only against the realist metaphysics which Scotus had retained but against many of Scotus’s core doctrines, such as predestination. Ockham’s greatest contribution in relation to our study comes in his understanding of \textit{potentia absoluta} versus \textit{potentia ordinata} and its impact on grace, salvation, and justification. Although Ockham is best known as a representative of nominalism, his thought should not been seen as synonymous with it.\footnote{See Heiko Oberman, “Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism,” \textit{Harvard Theological Review} 53, no. 1 (1960): 47. Another important distinction between Scotus and nominalism is the distinction between both the contents of justification as well as the context of the same. Oberman details this in “Iustitia Christi and Iustitia Dei: Luther and the Scholastic Doctrines of Justification,” \textit{Harvard Theological Review} 59, no. 1 (1966): 4–6.}

In addition to Ockham’s reworking of justification and salvation, Ockham has much to say on the nature and structure of the church as well as the role of the universal priesthood. There is no doubt that Ockham accepts that the structure of the church (including the authority that goes with it) was divinely instituted.\footnote{John Ryan, \textit{The Nature, Structure, and Function of the Church in William of Ockham} (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1973), 44.} Despite this, he interpreted its institutional function in anything but a traditional way.
According to Ockham, divine power is not promised specifically to an office but to God’s people who constitute the office: “That which applies to the whole Church must not be attributed to part of the church, even the principal part.\footnote{Ryan} That which is promised to the whole and to no part, ought not to be attributed to any part, even the more important. But . . . this promise was made to no part.\footnote{Ryan} This understanding leaves a great deal of room for the individual believer and limits the power of the papacy/episcopacy.

Through these distinctions, Ockham is able to affirm both the divine office and the indispensable role of the laity in the life of the church. Neither is sublimated to the other, and both have a divinely appointed role. While Luther is highly critical of numerous aspects of Ockham’s philosophy and theology, Ockham’s emphasis on faith and the important role of the laity surely provided Luther with fertile ground in which to develop his own doctrine.

\textit{Gabriel Biel (c. 1410-1495)}

Biel, who had taught at the newly founded University of Tübingen, stood firmly in the vein of Ockham and the nominalists. He spent much of his academic life constructing a systematic development of Ockham’s work. Like others before him, his publications included a commentary on Lombard’s \textit{Sentences} as well as his commentary

\footnote{Ryan} Quod competit toti ecclesiase, non est attribuendum parti ecclesiae, etiam principali, \textit{Dialogus I}, p. 478, II. 41-42 as quoted in Ryan.

\footnote{Ryan} Illid quod promittitur toti & nulli parti, non debuit alicui parti attribute, etiam principaliore. Sed . . . nulli parti fuit hoc promissum,” ibid. p. 489, II. 1-2 as quoted in Ryan.
on the canon of the Mass, which Luther was supposed to have virtually committed to
memory.\footnote{On Biel, see Heiko Oberman, \textit{The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963).}

Biel’s significance for this study is twofold. First, it was the medieval and
nominalistic theology represented in Biel that Luther fundamentally rejected.\footnote{Heiko Oberman, “Iustitia Christi and Iustitia Dei: Luther and the Scholastic Doctrine of Justification,” \textit{Harvard Theological Review} 59 (1966):14-24.} Luther’s understanding of scholasticism and nominalism was based largely upon his understanding
and interpretation of Biel. Second, in Biel’s work on Ockham, he reworks and expands
the doctrine of justification and salvation. He does this, like Ockham, in the context of the
potentia absoluta and the potentia ordinata.\footnote{The following discussion is drawn from Oberman, \textit{Harvest}, 30–56.}

Biel explicitly discusses the two powers in two places: first, in the context of
justification and second, in the context of the sacraments and their effects.\footnote{Ibid., 37.} To
understand their application, we must establish their meaning in Biel’s mind. First and
foremost, the “double potentia” should not be seen as alternatives to each other or divine
ways of divine action—as Oberman points out, God’s actions \textit{ad extra} are undivided.\footnote{Ibid.}

Nor is it to be understood that God can act sometimes with, sometimes without
order—this would contradict God’s very being. But this distinction should be
understood to mean that God can—and, in fact, has chosen to—do certain things
according to the laws which he freely established, that is, \textit{de potentia ordinata}. On
the other hand, God can do everything that does not imply contradiction, whether
God has decided to do these things (\textit{de potentia ordinata}) or not, as there are

\begin{itemize}
\item[$\dag$]\footnote{56 On Biel, see Heiko Oberman, \textit{The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963).}
\item[$\dag$] The following discussion is drawn from Oberman, \textit{Harvest}, 30–56.
\item[$\dag$] Ibid., 37.
\item[$\dag$] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
many things God can do which he does not want to do. The latter is called God’s power, de potentia absoluta.\textsuperscript{61} God has the power to do anything (potentia absoluta) but willingly limits himself to ordained methods (natural laws or potentia ordinata), without these ordained methods contradicting his absolute power. Biel can also move the other way, from the ordained to the absolute power: he gives Nicodemus as an example of this. Christ says that only those who are baptized by water and Spirit will enter heaven—this is the new law. Despite this, Biel points out that under the old law circumcised children could enter heaven: “This proves, that this is possible in an absolute sense, though not true now, de facto, de potentia ordinata.”\textsuperscript{62} According to Biel, moving beyond Ockham’s definition, God may also suspend natural laws to accomplish his will; miracles are an example of this.

This distinction (not divorce) between potentia ordinata and potentia absoluta has implications for revelation. God has ordained revelation through his chosen means, but he also leaves open the possibility of revelation through other means according to his absolute power. This distinction leads Biel to a fundamental affirmation of the natural knowledge of God through mere human existence. This knowledge of God, or the “epistemology of the viator,” is abstract and deficient knowledge. What this knowledge of God clarifies is not sufficiency for salvation but its deficiencies and need for God’s supernatural revelation.\textsuperscript{63} Oberman importantly points out that these two spheres, faith and reason, do not contradict each other or provide multiple truths: “Faith is not irrational

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 41.
or contrary to natural reason, but rather ungraspable by human reason.\footnote{Ibid., 42.} Far from contradiction, Biel, in Oberman’s words, paints a picture of a “peaceful coexistence” of the two.

The mystical aspects of Biel’s theology relative to revelation also deserve mention here.\footnote{As Oberman points out, the best way to reference the relationship between Biel’s theology and mysticism is “mystical elements in Biel’s theology” rather than “Biel’s mystical theology,” Oberman, \textit{Harvest}, 359.} While leaning heavily on the mysticism of Jean Gerson (and what Oberman refers to as his “spiritual aristocracy”) Biel moves beyond it.\footnote{Gerson’s position was that “union with the abyss of God’s inscrutable will” was the mystical experience that was granted only to the privileged Viator; Oberman, \textit{Harvest}, 340.} Oberman characterizes this as a movement toward the “democratization of mysticism.”\footnote{Ibid., 341} This democratization allowed that Christians at each stage (beginning, advanced, and perfect) could have mystical union with God and his will for their life. He understands perfection not to be an absolute but a dynamic state, one tethered to the context of the particular individual. Each individual, as they exercise “facere quod in se est,”\footnote{“Do what is within you.”} has access to God’s revelation. The highest point of growth for Biel—where mystical union with God is at its highest level—comes when one is in “absolute love with God,” which he defines as contrition.

What is telling here is who is able to have access to God. We are reminded of Aquinas’s emphasis on the necessity of the orders and ordination as a sign of a greater dispensation of grace, which implies hierarchy, even if it is for the benefit of the whole
The mystical aspects of Biel’s theology, however, allow for every Christian at whatever state (or whatever status) to have union with God, depending only on their state of contrition. This “democratization of mysticism” would provide a partial basis for Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood.

Traditional scholastic theology hinges salvation on meritorious the act(s) of the “viator,” or pilgrim. Here Biel is no exception, as he closely follows Ockham based on their understanding of the potentia absoluta and potentia ordinata. While God has a relationship with human de potentia ordinata, there is also another order of relationship based on the potentia absoluta. This opportunity, or better put, possibility, allows that God is not required or compelled to operate strictly within the confines of potentia ordinata. Biel, then, following Ockham, argues that God would honor bonitas moralis (“moral goodness”) either in a state of grace or in a state of nature. God is not required but rather chooses to honor bonitas moralis based on how he relates to humanity (by ordained or absolute power).69 God’s misericordia (“mercy, compassion”) and iustitia (“justice”) then are redefined and, at some level, unconditioned. Oberman points to three places where Biel believes the Bible establishes this misericordia out of potentia absoluta. The first was mentioned earlier: that those in the old covenant were able to enter heaven being only circumcised, and not baptized. Second, despite the fact that according to ordained power a certain “disposition is required before grace can be given, St. Paul was lifted to the seventh heaven and thus granted the visio beatifica” while he was still persecuting the church. Last is the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Biel points

69 Ibid., 43–44.
out that not only was a proper disposition not present for grace to be given but also that this grace was “concreated” with her soul even before original sin could act.  

There are then, for Biel, two eternal decrees. The first is the decree as it relates to potentia absoluta. God moves from misericoridia to iustitia outside of time in an absolute sense in and for his whole creation. The second is the decree as it relates to the potentia ordinata. God has chosen to make his will contingent on contingent laws that he created by absolute power. In this decree, God moves temporally from misericoridia to iustitia, parallel to his procession in potentia absoluta.

A consideration of the viator’s state of pure nature, or puris naturalibus (without infused grace), must thus be bracketed by potentia absoluta. Even in this state, God’s influence is still functioning. Oberman points out one very important distinction between Ockham and Biel on humanity’s possibility in puris naturalibus. Biel, like Ockham, believes that God could have the same impact with secondary causes as he would if he did not use them. This being said, Biel does not see naturalism as a secondary or substandard vehicle for God’s work. Oberman believes that in Biel there is a much more “explicit tendency towards naturalism, as acts performed under the general influence of God are said to be more completely in man’s own power than those performed under the influence of created grace.” Ockham, therefore, is less willing to put such a heavy emphasis on this context and humanity’s ability within it.

70 Ibid., 46.
71 Ibid., 50.
72 Ibid.
Biel’s presentation of the *potentia ordinata, potentia absoluta*, and the viator’s *puris naturabilis* struck a negative chord, to say the least, for Luther, who consistently presented God’s proper role as that of donor rather than as acceptor of human righteousness.\(^{73}\) For Biel, *fides charitate formata* was primary. Luther replaces this with *fides Christo formata*.

Luther thus both reacted against and drew upon the complex matrix of medieval theology and practice that formed his immediate context. In the tradition of scholastic theology, beginning with Lombard’s *Sentences*, the relationship of Christians with the office of ministry (or the sacrament of order) was a continual focus, closely joined with the debate over the conveyance of God’s grace and its effectiveness. Luther, picking up from this discussion the dependency of Christians upon God’s grace, struggled with and eventually evolved past scholastic theology into his own understanding of justification, salvation, and faith. Justification, in Luther’s scheme, becomes the essential element in the establishment and extension of the universal priesthood.

Mystical theology provided important seeds for Luther as well. John Tauler in particular had significant influence on Luther.\(^{74}\) Tauler believed that the presence of the Holy Spirit leveled all people and vocations. All secular callings and activities, according to Tauler, are brought within the orbit of God’s holy purpose. He also emphasized the

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\(^{74}\) For an extensive study of this see Bengt R. Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics* (Philadelphia: Augsburg), 1982.
important vocational value of loving one’s neighbor. Moreover, for Tauler, there is no special calling or setting apart in the act of ordination.75

The emergence of the mendicant friars and their new forms of ministry also transformed the possibilities for late medieval lay Christians. St. Francis’s founding of the third order and its inclusion of peasants, artisans, and others changed the landscape of the church. He opened the door for Christians to pursue a holy life and acts of service outside of the traditional confines of monastic life.76

I contended at the beginning of the chapter that it would be evident that Luther’s inheritance was valuable for his development of the priesthood. Second, that Luther’s turned much of his inheritance on its head by concentrating on the primacy of the Gospel above all else. This concentration sets Luther’s trajectory for the development of the doctrine that I will present in chapter four.

Historiography of Luther’s Doctrine of the Universal Priesthood

The status of the doctrine of the universal priesthood in Luther’s thought and writings and its development over the course of Luther’s career, however, are matters of scholarly controversy. I am going to present several lines of research and scholarship that point out the complexities and challenges in researching this topic.

75 See Louise Gnädinger, Johannes Tauler: Lebenswelt und Mystische Lehre (München: C. H. Beck, 1993), 129–46. While there is speculation as to the authorship of the Theologia Germanica, it is widely accepted that Tauler, as a member of the “Friends of God,” influenced its writing. The Theologia Germanica is dedicated to teaching all Christians how to follow the path of Christ, which was not limited to ordained clergy.

76 Ozment, Age, 98–118, and also Herbert Grundmann, Religious Movements in the Middle Ages (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 1995. Grundmann especially discusses the new opportunities for women’s involvement in religious life.
The doctrine of the universal priesthood in Luther received its share of attention in twentieth century scholarship, though historically, it had paled in comparison with such subjects as justification and the sacraments. In the early twentieth century, the “Luther Renaissance” inaugurated by Karl Holl opened up new lines of research that had been ignored. The reality is that with the lack of emphasis and development of the universal priesthood by Melanchthon, his contemporaries, and finally Lutheran Orthodoxy, research in this area was slim until the middle of the nineteenth century. Books like *Grundsätze evangelisch-lutherischer Kirchenverfassung* (Erlangen: T Bläsing, 1835) by J. F. W. Höfling and F. J. Stahl’s *Die Kirchenverfassung nach Lehre und Recht der Protestanten* (Erlangen: T Bläsing, 1862) helped bring the issue of the universal priesthood to the forefront once again in Lutheran theology.

The development of this new research on the universal priesthood gave rise to a healthy and understandable debate on the subject, which has manifested itself in the delineation of two contrasting theological explanations, both attributed to Luther, describing the office of public ministry in its relation to or independence from the universal priesthood. Hans Liermann has pointed out that all of Luther’s doctrine of ministry “has lived from the tension between the office of ministry and the congregation.” The first explanation is what has been referred to as the “delegation” or “transferal theory,” which holds that the office of ministry is established out of the universal priesthood. In this interpretation, the universal priesthood transfers or delegates its power to the office of ministry to be executed *publicly* (as compared with the universal

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priesthood’s exercise of it *privately*). The second theory is referred to as “divine institution.” In contrast to the delegation theory, this theory holds that the special ministry is divinely instituted by the priesthood of Christ and takes its authority from Christ alone. Each of these theories has profound implications for the office of ministry, the universal priesthood, and temporal authority.

Over the past 150 years, scholars have lined up on either side of this divide. Höfling essentially ascribed to the delegation theory with a caveat: the authority of the office of ministry comes from the grace that is bestowed by God rather than strictly from the will of humans.⁷⁸ The authority is from God, but the ministry is not a special status *given* by God. Its origin is from the universal priesthood for service to the universal priesthood.

A generation later, Stahl took a contrary stance to Höfling, emphasizing the divine initiation of the office. The special ministry may find its authorization in the local congregation (particularly in the form of the call to that congregation), but the initiation comes from God alone.⁷⁹ The difference here is that for Höfling the universal priesthood theoretically could exist without the office of ministry. Where the office is present, it has divine authority, but its presence is not strictly necessary. Since the universal priesthood has all the rights and responsibilities of the office, it would be able to fulfill all of the priestly needs of the community. Stahl, however, sees Luther establishing the office of ministry as a separate entity from the universal priesthood, but in service (though not

⁷⁸ Höfling, 77.

⁷⁹ Stahl, 67.
beholden) to it: “For Luther, the exercise of ministerial functions rests on divine authority, not on the ‘will, commission, or consent’ of the people.”

A century later the discussion surrounding the two theories continued with several seminal German publications. Three are of particular interest—Wilhelm Brunotte’s *Das giestliche Amt bei Luther* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1959), Hellmut Lieberg’s *Amt und Ordination bei Luther und Melanchthon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1962), and Hans Liermann, who was mentioned above. At the same time, there was also work on the universal priesthood being done in the English-speaking academy. Discussion still surrounded the relationship between the special and general priesthood, especially with regard to the origin of the special priesthood.

Much like Höfling and Stahl a century earlier, Brunotte, Liermann, and Lieberg adopt opposing interpretations of Luther’s understanding of the relationship between the office and the universal priesthood. Brunotte dedicates a significant amount of space to establishing Luther’s belief in the divine institution of the office of ministry. In the section on the establishment of the office of ministry (“Die Grundlegung Des Geistlichen Amtes: Die göttliche Stiftung des geistlichen Amtes”), Brunotte explicitly states that he believes that Luther sees the office of ministry as being divinely instituted: “The spiritual office is an institution of Christ (or of God) in the sense that it has been instituted, ordained, and commanded by Christ. The spiritual office thus rests upon a special

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81 Liermann, “Amt und Kirchenverfassung.”

82 Gerrish’s article will be looked at below, “Priesthood and Ministry,” 400-422.
appointment of God that effects the institution of this office.”

While he affirms the ability of the local congregation to call and authorize to preach, and so on, he asserts that the office is not established by men but by God.

Lieberg comes to a slightly different conclusion in his study on the office of ministry. Like Brunotte, he affirms the divine establishment of the office of ministry. But alongside this, Lieberg also sees a “subordinate line” in Luther’s thinking, “according to which the ministry is in fact derived from the common priesthood.”

A close reading of Lieberg does not, however, turn up such a clean-cut “subordinate line” in his writings. He can, however, be understood as nuancing the importance of the roles both of the congregation and of God in the establishment and the exercise of the office in ways that Gerrish later in the study seeks to further elucidate.

A more recent study, however, challenges the very notion that Luther teaches about a universal priesthood at all. Timothy Wengert in his 2008 book *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops: Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today* argues that the idea of the universal priesthood is an invention of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. He notes that Luther never used the phrase *das allgemeine Priestertum aller Gläubingen* nor

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83 Wilhelm Brunotte, *Das geistliche Amt bei Luther* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1959), 118–19: “Das geistliche Amt ist Stiftung Christi (bzw: Gottes) in dem Sinne, daß es von Christus eingesetzt, geordnet befolhen ist. Das geistliche Amt beruht also auf ein besonderen Anordnung Gottes, die die Einsetzung (Stiftung) dieses Amtes bewirkt.”


any of its German or Latin derivations or parallels. \(^{87}\) Ironically, in light of the present study, it is Spener whom Wengert credits with the creation of the phrase, “the spiritual priesthood.” \(^{88}\) Because of Spener’s influence, this idea of the universal priesthood became “completely ensconced” in Luther studies. \(^{89}\) Wengert reaches his conclusions by examining both Luther’s own work as well as Lutheran confessional writings. For my purposes, I will only examine Wengert’s interpretation of Luther’s work.

Wengert begins his investigation with Luther’s tract *An Den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung* (*To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*). Traditionally seen as supporting Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood, Wengert sees it as evidence of the unity of all believers. \(^{90}\) Wengert point to the word “Stand” (“walk of life”) in the title. This leads Wengert to believe that Luther doesn’t see two “stands” or estates – all Christians are from the same estate. \(^{91}\) Now, this unity of “stand” represents the first wall that Luther attacks: there is no difference between a spiritual estate or a lay estate; they are all one.

This emphasis on the unity of all believers does not discount the vital importance of the office of ministry. Using 1 Corinthians 12 as a proof text, Wengert shows how the

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\(^{87}\) Ibid., 1.  
\(^{88}\) Ibid.  
\(^{89}\) Ibid.  
\(^{90}\) Wengert, 6.  
\(^{91}\) Ibid.
Christian body can remain together, while parts serve distinct functions. In this case, the function is the public office of ministry.\footnote{Ibid., 7.}

The emergence of the office of ministry required Luther to answer two questions. First, what was the substance of ordination relative to the universal priesthood, and second, what sets apart the public office of ministry from other Christian offices.\footnote{Ibid., 9.} Luther considered ordination as an entrusting of the priestly responsibilities to the office of ministry. Just because there was no “character indebilis” in it, didn’t make it insignificant. Second, the public office is set apart strictly because it is public.\footnote{Ibid., 14.}

Wengert spends numerous pages giving example after example support to this view of ministry. For Wengert, this tract is not a support of the universal priesthood, but of the development of the office of ministry.

Wengert then moves to Luther’s tract \textit{De instituendis ministris Ecclesiae} (Concerning the Ministry). Again, Wengert sees this tract as seminal to the development of the doctrine of the universal priesthood, but which has been sadly misinterpreted.\footnote{Ibid., 18-19.} He rejects the idea that the tract supported an exaltation of the universal priesthood over the office of ministry. The tract was written for the Utraquist bishops in Bohemia. Despite their independence from Rome they still looked there for confirmation for their bishops. Luther rejected this practice entirely. When proper public preaching was absent (i.e. no rightly appointed bishops), heads of household could read the Gospel and baptize (which
the bishops already allowed save confirmation from Rome). Luther uses this as a teaching point. The Lord’s Supper was something quite different. The Lord’s Supper should not occur in a house church and was not necessary during a crisis (sub periculum). Wengert believes that Luther then extrapolates from a single Christian household to a wider level. The public office was needed in cities and towns for the Lord’s Supper to be administered and during times of danger the Word is the only thing necessary.

Wengert then presents a linguistic point to further his argument. Wengert claims that when Luther uses the word “priest” (sacerdotes) he does not mean the public office of ministry. The public office is translated as presbyterum or ministrum. Sacerdotes is applied to all Christians who are not a part of the presbyterum. Simply, one is baptized a sacerdotes, but one must be ordained to be presbyterum. The responsibilities of the sacerdos are the same as that of the presbyterum. The sacerdos is not greater than the presbyterum as the word is given to the whole Christian community. Thus the universal priesthood does not exist: all are sacerdos and the distinction between them and the public office exists only in the public execution of the Word.

Lastly, Wengert addresses Luther’s tract, Von den Conciliis und Kirchen (On The Councils and the Churches), another document that has contributed to the development of the doctrine of the universal priesthood. Wengert does two things here. First, he points

96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid., 20.
99 Ibid.
out the utter lack of mention of the universal priesthood.\textsuperscript{100} This is significant as the tract lays out the identifying marks of a true church. Second, Wengert points out that the text heavily emphasizes the office of ministry as the fifth mark of the church. This mark is so important that Luther feels the need to explain why people would not be included (women and children).\textsuperscript{101} This is enough for Wengert to conclude that the universal priesthood does not exist in Luther’s thought.

Wengert’s study, while valuable in some places, has flaws. First is his use of sources. His reading of Luther is selective—certainly not a fault unique to him—and fails to account for a the variety of ways in which Luther speaks. A good example of this is another tract from 1520, Luther’s \textit{Tractatus de Libertate Christiana}. Written in the same year as \textit{An den Christlichen}, Luther emphasizes the importance of laypeople’s responsibility to their neighbor. This responsibility is the same responsibility that the “\textit{presbyteros}” has to other Christians. Another example of this is Luther’s sermons. Multiple times Luther emphasizes the importance of the congregation of laypeople (“\textit{sacerdos}”) to hold the public office accountable (“\textit{presbyteros}”).\textsuperscript{102} Luther takes it a step further and gives the laypeople power to dismiss or appoint a pastor, as seen in his sermon on John 10 from 1523.\textsuperscript{103} These writings are right during the time of some of the writings that Wenger uses to disprove the universal priesthood; they should be dealt with. Second, Wengert does not develop or employ Luther’s understanding of vocation

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{100 Ibid., 26.}
\footnote{101 Ibid., 27.}
\footnote{102 See page 72 for a full example.}
\footnote{103 WA 10,1,2:292 (Lenker, \textit{Sermons}, 3:381).}
\end{footnotes}
enough. A full engagement with Luther’s understanding of vocation would make clear that the office of ministry is equal to other vocations (blacksmith, printer, etc.). Luther argues strenuously that each of these specific individuals has a vocation and potestas to administer the Word and sacrament that defines their existence as Christians.\textsuperscript{104} Third, Wengert ignores the context in which Luther is operating. The reality is, from Luther’s writings, that Luther sees at least some difference between the public office and the rest of the Christians. Admittedly, early on the difference was not one of substance, but of function. But as I will show in discussing the fourth phase of Luther’s development, the office of ministry does take on a much more important role in Luther’s thought. This distinction is only proof that Luther sees a bifurcation of all Christians: those who serve in the office of ministry and those who do not. By eliminating the universal priesthood Wengert is able to protect lay people from the use and abuse of power by the office of ministry. When there is no difference, there is no problem. Luther’s later emphasis and development of the office of ministry does not have to mean an increase of power for the office or a special “character indebilis” for it. What it means is simply that Luther’s context changes and more development was necessary.

I set out in this section to summarize Luther’s medieval inheritance and present several lines of research and scholarship that present the challenges and complexities of an in-depth study like this. This historiographic study helps to frame Luther’s own search in light of some contemporary interpretations and questions. These studies help us to understand Luther’s own “rediscovery” and development of the doctrine of the

universal priesthood out of medieval and patristic precedents, transformed in light of his own distinctive reading of Scripture.

Chapter three will be strictly limited to developing Luther’s own understanding of the universal priesthood. In that chapter I will set out to prove that the universal priesthood is not merely an aspect of Luther’s doctrine, but a central and defining part of his doctrine. The central place of the universal priesthood then defines his understanding of its responsibility, including providing words of absolution to other lay Christians.
CHAPTER THREE
LUTHER’S DEVELOPMENT OF THE
DOCTRINE OF THE UNIVERSAL PRIESTHOOD

Introduction
Luther’s treatment of the doctrine of the universal priesthood was multifaceted and spread over a lifetime. This chapter will examine the development of the universal priesthood compared to the development of the office of ministry. Luther’s thought will be looked at through the lens of four distinct phases enumerated by Bernhard Lohse.1 Each phase will show the development and importance of the doctrines of the universal priesthood and of the office of ministry for Luther. This chapter will cement the importance of the universal priesthood in Luther’s doctrine.

Phase One: Early Development of the Universal Priesthood (1517–1520)
The earliest period of Luther’s public career produced some of Luther’s most significant and influential writings. While his complete break with Rome did not occur until late 1520, the divergences between himself and the central medieval tradition that had begun to emerge in his lecturing were summarized in the *Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam* (Disputation against Scholastic Theology) and publicized, in a theologically more limited but ecclesiastically explosive form, in his widely distributed Ninety-Five

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1 Lohse, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 288.
Theses. As Luther articulated his theology of justification by grace over these years, he came to concrete conclusions regarding its implications for the responsibility of every Christian.

As Luther’s confidence in Roman churchly authority waned over the course of his conflict with representatives of the curia, he began to develop a new understanding of the authority and responsibility of every Christian within the church. Out of this development, by the second half of 1520, came three of Luther’s most seminal writings—An Den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung (To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate), De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae (Babylonian Captivity of the Church), and Tractatus de Libertate Christiana (Freedom of a Christian). Written in succession, each one of these documents highlights both Luther’s grave concerns over Roman abuses of authority (both theological and ecclesial) and his burgeoning understanding and development of the universal priesthood. Each writing will be taken in succession here.

An Den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung (To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate).

The earliest of the three treatises that Luther wrote in 1520, his address To the Christian Nobility was written at the request of “unidentified” members of the Saxon courts and Wittenberg professors. It is a formidable attack on the ideology of the medieval Western church and its world: “Luther laid the ax to the whole complex of ideas upon which the

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2 Martin Luther, Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam. (1517), WA 1:221–228 (LW 31:3–16), Disputatio pro declaration virutis indulgentiarum (1517), WA 1:233–38 (LW 31:25–33). The final break with Rome came with the bull threatening excommunication, which Luther burned publicly, as described in Warum des Papes und seiner Jünger Bücher von D Martin Luther verbrannt sind (1520), WA 7:152-186 (LW 31:383–95).
social, political, legal, and religious thought of the Western world had been developing for nearly a thousand years.”

The work is split up into three sections. The first section addresses the “three walls” behind which the Papacy was entrenched—the distinction between clergy and laity, the claim that only the pope can interpret Scripture, and lastly that only the pope can rightly call a church council. The second section deals with ecclesiastical abuses and the need for a general council. The third section deals with specific reforms that Luther believes need to take place. The first two sections are most germane to the discussion of the universal priesthood.

Wall One: Distinction between Clergy and Laity

As seen in the introduction to this chapter, the absolute power of the clergy was a fundamental principle of the ideology of the medieval church, made concrete as the distinction between the spiritual and the temporal estates. Luther here rejects this distinction as unscriptural and thus false. All Christians are a part of the spiritual estate, with distinctions found only in office,

Let us begin by attacking the first wall. It is pure invention that popes bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and for this reason: all

3 James Atkinson, introduction to Address to the Christian Nobility, LW 44:120.

4 Martin Luther, An Den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung (1520), WA 6:406. LW 44:126: “The Romanists have very cleverly built three walls around themselves. Hitherto they have protected themselves by these walls in such a way that no one has been able to reform them. As a result, the whole of Christendom has fallen abominably.”
Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. Ordination, tonsure, hours, consecration, and so on—these set no one apart. Rather the only thing that sets one apart is baptism. Therefore all who have been baptized are a part of the “royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9).

As a consequence, for Luther, the nature and meaning of ordination changes. According to well-established medieval theology, ordination set a man apart for spiritual work. Ordained priests had the character indelebilis, or indelible mark, that distinguished them from regular laypersons and set them apart for sacerdotal work, above all the offering of the Mass. Luther rejects this idea of an indelible mark out of hand—the only indelible mark belongs to those who have been baptized. In fact, all baptized Christians have the character indelebilis through baptism. Ordination is not a sacrament, an outward sign pointing to God’s promise; rather, it is the communal assignment of the responsibilities of public office: “Therefore a priest in Christendom is nothing else but an officeholder.” One difference is that now if that person either resigns his responsibilities

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or performs poorly, he can be removed and join the lay congregation again, since there is no indelible mark as priest—his call comes from the congregation.\(^8\)

The importance of laypeople increases with this new understanding of ordination. Since there is no “marked” difference between the two, save their office (the priests occupying a public one), laypeople are to be considered as being of the same spiritual estate as priests: “It follows from this argument that there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate; all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do.”\(^9\) This opens the rights and responsibilities of the priesthood to all Christians, ordained or not. Luther points out that a cobbler, smith, or peasant has both the office of their trade as well as the responsibility of consecrated priests and bishops.\(^10\) In the absence of a priest (i.e., in an emergency), any Christian may baptize, give absolution, and even preach, since all of the baptized are priests:

To put it still more clearly: suppose a group of earnest laymen were taken prisoner and set down in a desert without an episcopally ordained priest among them. And suppose they were to come to a common mind there and then in the desert and elect one of their number, whether he were married or not, and charge him to baptize, say mass, pronounce absolution, and preach the Gospel. Such a man

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\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) WA 6:408 (LW 44:129). “Szo folget ausz dissem, das leye, priester, fursten, bischoff, und wie sie sagen, geistlich und weltlich, keynen andern unterscheid ym grund warlich haben, den des ampts odder wercks halben, unnd nit des stands halbenn, dan sie sein alle geystlichs stands, warhafftig priester, bischoff und bepste, aber nit gleichs eynerley wercks.”

\(^10\) WA 6:409 (LW 44:130).
would be as truly a priest as though he had been ordained by all the bishops and popes in the world.\textsuperscript{11}

One particular aspect of the universal priesthood that Luther develops is its significance for secular authority. Specifically, since Christians who serve as secular authorities have been baptized, have the same faith, and the “same Gospel as the rest of us, we must admit that they are priests and bishops and we must regard their office as one which has a proper and useful place in the Christian community.”\textsuperscript{12} This point ended up being extremely important later in Luther’s life when he called on princes to defend and promote the spread of the Evangelical Church in Germany. As we will see, Luther requested the princes to step in and both appoint/support Lutheran pastors in church as well as function as notbischofe (“emergency bishops”) in times when no bishops were available.

Wall Two: The Ability to Interpret Scripture

The second “wall” that Luther identifies to be torn down is related to the first. He criticizes the Roman Church’s belief that only the pope could be the correct and final arbiter in the interpretation of Scripture. This claim was based both on the pope’s membership in the spiritual estate as well as his status as head of the church. Taken

\textsuperscript{11} WA 6:407-8 (LW 44:129). “Und das ichs noch klerer sag; Wen ein heufflin fromer Christen leyen wurden gefangen unnd in ein wusteney gesetzt, die nit bey sich hetten einen geweyheten priester von einem Bischoff, unnd wurden alda der sachen eynisz, erweleten eynen unter yhn, er were ehlich odder nit, und befilhen ym das ampt zu teuffen, mesz halten, absolvieren und predigenn, der wer warhaftig ein priester, als ob yhn alle Bischoffe unnd Bepste.”

\textsuperscript{12} WA 6:408 (LW 44:129). “Hat den selben glauben unnd Evangely, mussen wir sie lassen priester und Bischoff sein, und yr ampt zelen als ein ampt, das da gehore und nutzlich sey der Christenlichen gemeyne.”
together, the first two walls meant that laypeople had to depend on the priesthood to interpret and to read Scripture for them. This is unacceptable to Luther because it is not scriptural: “They assume sole authority for themselves . . . yet they can’t point to a single letter.”¹³ For Luther this becomes another example of heretical, un-Christian, and even unnatural ordinances contained in canon law.

In contrast, Luther believes that all those who are baptized and have faith should be allowed not only to read Scripture but be able to interpret it as well. If each baptized Christian has true faith, spirit, understanding, word, and the mind of Christ, then why should they not be allowed?

Besides, if we are all priests, as was said above, and all have one faith, one Gospel, one sacrament, why should we not also have the power to test and judge what is correct or incorrect in matters of faith? What becomes of the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:15: “He that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man,” II Corinthians 4:13: “We have all the same Spirit of faith”? Why, then, should not we perceive is consistent with faith and what does not, as well as does an unbelieving pope does?¹⁴

Luther actually takes it a step further. Christians do not just have the privilege of reading and judging Scripture, but it is also their duty and responsibility: “Therefore it is

²¹³ WA 6:411 (LW 44:133). “Das sie allein wollen meister der schrift sein, ob sie schon yhr leblang nichts drynnen lernenn, vormessen sich allein der ubirkeit, kauckeln fur uns mit unvorschampten wortten, der Bapst mug nit yrren ym glaubenn, er sey bosz odder frum, mugen desselben nit ein buchstaben antzeygen.”

²¹⁴ WA 6:412 (LW 44:135). “Ubir das, szo sein wir yhe alle priester, wie droben gesagt ist, alle einen glauben, ein Evangely, einerley sacrament haben, wie solten wir den nit auch haben macht, zuschmecken und urteylen, was do recht odder unrecht [1. Cor. 2, 15.] ym glaubenn were? wo bleybt das wort Pauli i. Corint. ij. ‘Ein geistlicher [2. Cor. 4, 13.] mensch richtet alle ding, unnd wirt von niemants gerichtet’, und ij. Corint. iiii. ‘wir haben alle eynen geyst des glaubens’? wie solten wir denn nit fulen szo wol als ein ungleubiger bapst, was dem glauben eben odder ubein ist?”
the duty of each Christian to espouse the cause of the faith, to understand and defend it, and to denounce every error.”

Wall Three: Any Christian May Call a Church Council, Not Just the Pope

In Luther’s day, among the claims of the papal party in the wake of the conciliar movement was that the pope was the sole authority who could call a council. Just as his commentary on the past two walls, here Luther attacks the arrogation of power to the pope and the concomitant disregard of Scripture. He claims that they have no basis in Scripture to call a council. Luther then naturally turns to Scripture, pointing out that in Acts 15 it was not Peter who called the apostolic council but the apostles and elders. The power and ability to call a council is thus seated in each Christian.

This first treatise from 1520 sheds some important light on Luther’s thinking very early in his development. Luther was clearly concerned both about the preponderance of power claimed by the papacy and about its abuse. In particular, he was concerned that the power of the pope diminished the power of the Gospel and the promise of Christ.

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16 WA 6:413 (LW 44:136).

17 WA 6:414 (LW 44:137).

18 Ibid.
In *De Captivitate* Luther criticizes the Roman sacramental system that controlled the lives of all Christians from cradle to grave.\(^{19}\) Much as the Jews were carried away from Jerusalem into captivity by the Babylonian Empire, so Christians, Luther argues, have been “carried away” from the Scriptures under the control and tyranny of the papacy.\(^{20}\) Luther dedicates half the treatise to the “tyranny” of the Lord’s Supper and the three captivities that accompany it. The second half is dedicated to a discussion of the rest of the sacraments. For our purposes, three of the sacraments are particularly relevant: the Lord’s Supper, baptism, and ordination. All three will be examined here.

The first step to “freeing” Christians from the bondage of the papacy is a new and proper (meaning scriptural) understanding of the Lord’s Supper. The Roman view distorts not only the meaning of the Mass itself but also the authority of those who administer it. Luther identifies these distortions as “captivities.” The first captivity that Luther addresses is the forbidding “of giving both kinds” (bread and wine) to the laity.\(^{21}\) The power of the elements prevented the laity from receiving them in full. Only priests were able to handle both elements, as only they were able to perform the act of transforming the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation). This meant that only priests, with their *character indelebilis*, were

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20 Luther, *De Captivitate*, WA 6:497-573 (LW 36:3).

21 Luther, *De Captivitate*, WA 6:518 (LW 36:27).
able to have access to the full sacrament and therefore that they had complete power, even ownership, of the sacrament. This Luther firmly rejects:

The sacrament does not belong to the priests, but to all men. The priests are not lords, but servants in duty bound to administer both kinds to those who desire them, as often as they desire them. If they wrest this from the laity and deny it to them by force, they are tyrants. These same servants are likewise bound to administer baptism and absolution to everyone who seeks them, because he has a right to them; but if they do not administer them, the seeker has full merit of his faith, while they will be accused before Christ as wicked servants.22

The second captivity Luther identifies is the requirement that the faithful believe in the dogma of transubstantiation. Luther’s concern, as usual, is that this Aristotelian explanation cannot be found in Scripture, “for what is asserted without Scriptures or proven revelation may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed.”23 Given its lack of scriptural basis, one need not be considered a heretic for not holding to the belief. The true concern for Luther is about lay Christians who have never learned philosophy and may not understand it anyway.24 What they need to grasp is not the difference between substance and accident but the fact of Christ’s sacrifice for them.

22 Luther, De Captivitate, WA 6:507 (LW 36:27). “Sacramentum non est sacerdotum sed omnium, nec domini sunt sacerdotes sed ministri, debentes reddere utramque speciem petentibus, quotiescunque petierint. Quod si hoc ius rapuerint laicis et vi negaverint, tyranni sunt, laici sine culpa vel una vel utraque carent, fide interim servandi et desyderio integri sacramenti. Sicut baptismum et absolutionem debent petenti, tanquam ius habenti, ipsi ministri, quod si non dederint, petens plenum habet fidei suae meritum, ipsi coram Christo servi nequam accusabuntur.”

23 WA 6:508 (LW 36:29). “Nam quod sine scripturis asseritur aut revelatione probata, opinari licet, credi non est necesse.”

Luther considers the third captivity “the far most wicked abuse of all.”\(^{25}\) The belief that the Mass is a continual good work and sacrifice.\(^{26}\) He points to two fundamental problems. First, the Mass is not a sacrifice but Christ’s testament or promise. The focus should not be on the raising of the elements and all the rest of the action; rather, “we must turn our eyes and hearts simply to the institution of Christ and this alone.”\(^{27}\) This testament is the promise of forgiveness of sins. Each time Christians participate in Mass they are reminded of God’s gift to them and are strengthened in their faith. All Christians are to cling to the word of the promising God they hear in the Mass.\(^{28}\) Conversely, since the Mass is a promise from God, it should be considered an object of faith and not a work of man. It exists in order to strengthen a person’s faith and remind them of God’s commitment to them: “It is certain, therefore, that the Mass is not a work which may be communicated to others, but the object of faith for strengthening and nourishing of each one’s own faith.”\(^{29}\)

Last, in light of the Mass’s importance as promise and object of faith, the words of Christ are to be heard by all people—including laypeople. The practice of repeating the words of institution in secret, quietly, or just out of the earshot of people undermines


\(^{26}\) WA 6:512 (LW 36:35).

\(^{27}\) WA 6:512 (LW 36:36). “Ad ipsam solam et puram Christi institutionem oculos et animum vertamus.”

\(^{28}\) WA 6:515 (LW 36:39).

\(^{29}\) WA 6:536 (LW 36:51). “Est ergo certum, Missam non esse opus aliis communicabile, sed objectum (ut dicitur) fidei propriae cuiusque alendae et roborandae.”
the purpose of the words. Priests, Luther says, hold the words in such reverence that they allow their reverence to displace true belief in the words and what they are actually for.\textsuperscript{30} Priests were never supposed to protect the words—they do not need protecting. Their job is to give the words of God’s promise to all people as an object of faith.

Luther deals with the sacrament of baptism in the \textit{De Captivitate} in similar terms. Baptism, like the Lord’s Supper, exists as both a sign of God’s work and a reminder of God’s promise or testament.\textsuperscript{31} Despite scriptural instructions to this effect, Rome has taken baptism into “captivity,” robbing it of both its sign and promise. First, baptism has become a human work and not a work of God. The problem is that if it is a human work, then it must be a merely human promise. But man’s promise is nothing to trust in. The rightful subject of the work, therefore, must be God. Baptism, like faith, comes from God and is a “work of God, not of man as Paul teaches (Eph. 2:8). The other works he works through us and with our help, but this one alone works in us and without our help.”\textsuperscript{32} The comfort that should come from baptism is not in who performs the baptism but in the promise and sign present in baptism.

Luther also guards against forcing the distinction between the inner and the outer work of baptism by claiming that man is the one who baptizes, but it is God who does the

\textsuperscript{30} WA 6:516 (LW 36:41).

\textsuperscript{31} WA 6:528 (LW 36:64).

inner work of faith. This, too, makes baptism a human work. Instead, for Luther, either it is all God’s own work, or it is not:

[W]e ought to receive baptism at human hands just as if Christ himself, indeed, God himself, were baptizing us with his own hands. For it is not man’s baptism, but Christ’s and God’s baptism, which we receive by the hand of a man, just as everything else that we have through the hand of someone else is God’s alone. Therefore beware of making any distinction in baptism by ascribing the outward part to man and the inward part to God. Ascribe both to God alone.33

Second, the promise of salvation that came with baptism has been made impotent by the way in which the church has treated the sacrament. While salvation remains for the baptized person, the liberty that came with it has been taken captive. Luther mentions two liberties in particular. The first is freedom to ignore all merely human decrees and laws. Baptism grants individuals the freedom to follow and obey Christ alone.34 The second is the freedom and responsibility to participate in the spiritual estate. According to Luther, the spiritual state is made up of those who have been baptized and have faith in Christ alone, not of those who have taken extra vows or made extra commitments—faith is enough. Those who take vows think that they are part of the spiritual estate, but they are the exact opposite for Luther: “These men are in truth heathen or hypocrites. They imagine themselves to be the church, or the heart of the church, the ‘spiritual’ estate and

33 WA 6:530 (LW 36:62). “Non enim hominis est sed Christi et dei baptismus, quem recipimus per manum hominis, Sicut quelibet alia creatura, qua utimur per manum alterius, non est nisi dei. Cave ergo sic discernas baptismum, ut externum homini, internum deo tribuas: utrumque soli deo tribue, nec conferentis personam aliam quam instrumentum vicarium dei accipe, per quod dominus in coelo sedens te in aquam suis manibus propriis mergit et remissionem peccatorum promittit in terris voce hominis tibi loquens per os ministri sui.”

34 WA 6:535 (LW 36:70).
the leaders of the church, when they are everything else but that.”35 It is faith, not works, that define the estate. Those who are baptized and are thus a part of the spiritual estate have the authority that comes with it—including the keys.36

By comparison with baptism, ordination as practiced by the medieval church is nothing at all. Luther quickly summarizes his thoughts on ordination in his introductory comments,

Of this sacrament the church of Christ knows nothing; it is an invention of the church of the pope. Not only is there nowhere any promise of grace attached to it, but there is not a single word said about it in the whole New Testament. Now it is ridiculous to put forth as a sacrament of God something that cannot be proved to have been instituted by God.37

Luther does not argue for a complete rejection of ordination but for a right understanding of it, which has profound implication for the relationship of clergy and laity within the church.

Luther rejected the divine status of ordination because it is merely a human work. The human work of ordination might be valuable, but it was still human. The priesthood is a ministry, like any other ministry, that is done in the name of all those in a church.38

35 WA 6:541 (LW 36:78). “Et eos ipsos esse revera gentiles seu hypocritas, qui se Ecclesiam aut cor Ecclesiae, item spirituales et rectores Ecclesiae arbitrantur, cum sint nihil minus.”


37 WA 6:560 (LW 36:106). “Hoc sacramentum Ecclesia Christi ignorat, inventumque est ab Ecclesia Papae: non enim solum nullam habet promissionem gratiae ullibi positam, sed ne verbo quidem eius meminit totum novum testamentum. Ridiculum autem est asserere pro sacramento dei, quod a deo institutum nusquam potest monstrari. Non quod dammandum censeam eum ritum per tanta saecula celebratum, sed quod in rebus sacris nolim humana commenta fingi, nec liceat astruere aliquod divinitus ordinatum quod divinitus ordinatum non est, ne ridiculi simus adversario.”

38 WA 6:564 (LW 36:113).
Ministers are chosen through the rite of ordination to be preachers of the Word for the aid of and in service to the whole congregation. If they fail to preach, the congregation may rescind the ordination, in which case the pastor returns to the status of layman. This change in status is possible in light of Luther’s rejection of any sense of character indelebilis for the ordained. The pastor comes from and can return to the congregation as a layperson.

This rejuvenated understanding of ordination and the priesthood has direct implications for the layperson. There is no longer a spiritual distinction between the priest and the rest of the people. They are all equally spiritual, the only difference occurring in their ministry. The congregation is the “royal priesthood” that then calls out a priest from its ranks in order to perform the public acts of the church, preaching in particular. The congregation then has the ability to recall this priest if he is not discharging the responsibilities of the office responsibly.

It must be emphasized that this difference is one of function or office (Amt) and not spiritual status: “If they were forced to grant that all of us that have been baptized are equally priests, as indeed we are, and that only the ministry was committed to them, yet with our common consent, they would then know that they have no right to rule over us except insofar as we freely concede it.”

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40 Ibid., “Inde enim et pastores dicuntur, quod pascere, id est docere, debeant.”
42 WA 6:564 (LW 36:113).
43 Martin Luther, De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae (1520), WA 6:564 (LW36:112). “Qui si cogerentur admittere, nos omnes esse aequaliter sacerdotes, quotquot baptisati sumus, sicut revera sumus,
The treatise *De libertati Christiana*, the third of the trio written in the second half of 1520, differs from the first two in having a much more conciliatory tone. It “contained a positive and unequivocal statement of Luther’s evangelical theology as applied to Christian life.”

From the outset of the treatise, Luther emphasizes the importance and power of faith over works. Faith provides everything for the believer—it is the one thing necessary for the Christian life. Works should not be seen as an avenue or a means to accomplish what faith cannot. That being said, works are not unimportant and have their place. Here lies the core of Luther’s teaching in this treatise, which Luther presents in the form of two propositions:

A Christian is perfectly free, Lord of all, subject to none.
A Christian is perfectly dutiful, servant of all.

Luther begins his discussion by pointing out the distinction between the spiritual and bodily man, or the inner and outer man. The spiritual and inner man is completely free and righteous through faith. He is not subject to anything or anyone—no external

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45 WA 7:49 LW 31:345.
vows, requirements of religion, or works of his own or of others: “That is that Christian liberty, our faith, which does not induce us to live in idleness or wickedness but makes the law and works unnecessary for any man’s righteousness and salvation.” 47 This freedom in faith allows all baptized Christians the birthright that comes with their new birth in Christ (and that they share with Christ)—kingship and priesthood. 48

Luther’s articulation of kingship and priesthood is significant in three different aspects. First, relative to kingship, every Christian through his or her faith is exalted with Christ by virtue of Christ’s spiritual power—that Christian is lord of everything and unable to be harmed. 49 This exaltation is not physical, as Luther understood the papacy to teach, but spiritual. The Christian is not accountable to other spiritual laws, rules, and so on—he or she is responsible to Christ alone. Not only is he or she responsible to no one, but all things are made subject to him spiritually. 50 In other words, the Christian is not subject to the rules and the oversight of the pope and the rest of the so-called spiritual estate, as now all baptized Christians are a part of the same estate.

Along with kingship, baptized Christians also share in the priesthood of Christ. Christians are able to participate in the responsibilities of the priesthood with Christ.

Not only are we the freest of kings, we are also priests forever, which is far more excellent than being kings, for as priests we are worthy to appear before God to

47 WA 7:53 (LW 31:349). “Atque haec est Christiana illa libertas, fides nostra, quae facit, non ut ociosi simus aut male vivamus, sed ne cuiquam opus sit lege aut operibus ad iustitiam et salutem.”

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.
pray for others and to teach one another divine things. These are the functions of priests, and they cannot be granted to any unbeliever. Thus Christ has made it possible for us, provided we believe in him, to be not only his brethren, co-heirs, and fellow-kings, but also his fellow-priests. Therefore we may boldly come into the presence of God in the spirit of faith and cry “abba father” and pray for one another, and do all things which we see done and foreshadowed in the outer and visible works of priests.\(^{51}\) Lastly, having dealt with the inner, spiritual person, Luther now turns to the outer, material person. It is with the outer person that an individual becomes a “dutiful servant to all, subject to all.” It is here where works become important, “here the work begins.”\(^{52}\)

Good works grow out of and are a result of the faith that Christ instills in an individual.

A Christian has not just the opportunity to do good works; they are also expected. Persons do not live for themselves alone; they all live for each other. Luther quotes Paul from Romans 14:7–8: “None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.”\(^{53}\) Quite simply, each Christian should do what Christ did for us:

Just as our neighbor is in need and lacks that in which we abound, so we were in need before God and lacked his mercy. Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each should become as it were a Christ to the other

\(^{51}\) WA 7:57 (LW 31:355). “Nec solum reges omnium liberrimi, sed sacerdotes quoque sumus inaeternum, quod longe regno excellentius, quod per sacerdotium digni sumus coram deo apparere, pro alius orare et nos invicem ea quae dei sunt docere. Haec enim sacerdotum officia sunt, quae prorsus nulli incredulo concedi possunt. Ita Christus nobis obtinuit, si in eum credimus, ut, sicut confratres, cohaeredes et correges, ita et consacerdotes ei simus, audentes cum fidutia per spiritum fidei coram deo prodire et clamare ‘Abba pater’ et alter pro altero orare et omnia facere, quae videmus visibili et corporali officio sacerdotum geri et figurari.” It should also be noted that this is not and was not intended to be a complete list of priestly responsibilities. Luther lays out a much more complete list in other writings, which I will examine later in the essay.

\(^{52}\) WA 7:59 (LW 31:358).

\(^{53}\) Romans 14:7-8 [NIV].
that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christian. 54

Christians are simply to be Christ to their neighbors by doing what Christ did. Christians are to exercise their rights and responsibilities as the universal priesthood. At this point, Luther does not spell out exactly what actions this would entail. We can only infer from past treatises what these may be. These will come later in his writings.

*Freedom of a Christian* builds on the concepts of the two previous treatises. Every baptized Christian participates with Christ in the priesthood. They are then responsible only to Christ and free from all other powers and expectations. With this freedom comes the responsibility to be Christ to all.

Phase one has highlighted two important aspects of Luther’s thought. First, Luther rejected papal authority, especially in the area of ordination. Second, Luther emphasized the importance and responsibility of baptized believers in the church. This phase begins to build the argument of this study that the universal priesthood is central to Luther’s thought.

Phase two presents Luther’s doctrine of the office of ministry and its relationship to the universal priesthood. Luther affirms the office, but the responsibilities of the office are extended to the universal priesthood. The difference between the two is a matter of public versus private.

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54 WA 7:66 (LW 31:367–68). “Igitur sicut proximus noster necessitatem habet et nostra abundantia indiget, ita et nos coram deo necessitatem habuimus et misericordia eius indiguimus: ideo sicut pater coelestis nobis in Christo gratis auxiliatus est, ita et nos debemus gratis per corpus et opera eius proximo nostro auxiliari et unusquisque alteri Christus quidam fieri, ut simus mutuum Christi et Christus idem in omnibus, hoc est, vere Christiani.”
Phase Two: Universal Priesthood and the Office of Ministry (1521–1523)

By 1521, Luther had successfully articulated the meaning and importance of the universal priesthood. This development elevated every Christian, whether ordained priest or otherwise, to the same status. The “freedom” that came from justification by faith and equal estates, however, presented its own challenges, particularly that of organization. While Luther affirmed that all Christians were priests and could act as priests, the practical application of that principle had to be worked out. Although Luther rejected the idea of a special spiritual status bestowed upon ordination, he did not reject ordination and “calling” out of hand. Ordination was acceptable as long as it was done in the right way and with the right understanding. The obvious question was what is the relationship between the universal priesthood and the appointed “office of ministry”? This question became poignant in light of external challenges Luther was facing. Others were misusing the freedom and responsibility that Luther was exalting. Individuals like Karstadt and Muntzer were abusing their call to freedom and responsibility and simply trampling over others’ freedom and faith. This abuse forced Luther to clarify his position on the office of ministry and its relationship to the universal priesthood. While Luther continued his attack on the Roman view of ordination and authority in this phase, he expanded beyond criticism to a more positive development of


56 For a great summary of this challenge see Ozment, *Age*, 340–80.
both the responsibilities and characteristics of the office of ministry, particularly in
response to the rise of the radical wing of the reform.

One of the seminal texts of this phase is De Instituendis Ministris (Concerning the
Ministry, 1523),\textsuperscript{57} in which Luther responds to the Bohemian Hussites’ (the Utraquists)
description of the compromises they had made to guarantee a regular ministry.\textsuperscript{58} He
chastises them for their compromise, instructing them that they (and all local
congregations) are able to appoint their own pastors when their superiors are not
interested in the Word.\textsuperscript{59} Another important text from this time was Das eyn Christliche
versamlung odder gemeyne recht und macht habe, alle lere tzu urteylen unde lerer zu
beruffen, eyn und abzusetzen, Grund und ursach aus der schrifft (That a Christian
Assembly or Congregation Has the right and Power to Judge all Teachings and to Call,
Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture).\textsuperscript{60} Luther argues
that the sure mark of a true Christian congregation was that the pure Gospel was taught
there.\textsuperscript{61} And wherever the Word is rightly taught, the congregation has the ability to

\textsuperscript{57} Martin Luther, De Instituendis Ministris (1523), WA 12:169–95 (LW 40:3-44).

\textsuperscript{58} The Bohemians were sending candidates for the priesthood to Italy for training and ordination. Once they returned, they renounced their vows and promised to give the Lord’s Supper in both kinds (LW 40:5).

\textsuperscript{59} Conrad Bergendoff, Introduction to Concerning the Ministry (1523), LW 40:6.

\textsuperscript{60} Martin Luther, WA11:408-416 (LW 39:305-314).

\textsuperscript{61} WA 11:408 (LW 39:305).
judge the teachings of bishops and councils. This right is instituted by Christ and cannot be subverted by the work of bishop, pope, or council.\textsuperscript{62}

Since all Christians are priests, no one can appoint them, nor can a particular group of Christians lay exclusive hold of the priestly rights. The office of ministry refers to “presbyter[s] or minister[s].” These are appointed from the community of priests “sacerdotes” and carry out the public duties of the priesthood for the whole community—this will be addressed later in the essay.\textsuperscript{63} Despite the difference between the public and private office, each Christian has the responsibility of the whole priestly office. Luther identifies six responsibilities that I will look at in detail here: the ministry of the Word; responsibility for the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper; praying for one another; sacrificing for one another (by bearing burdens for each other); judging doctrine and spirits; and the binding and loosing of sins (the keys).\textsuperscript{64}

\textit{Ministerium Verbi/Predigtamt (”Ministry of the Word”)}

Luther emphasized the responsibility and distinction of the “ministry of the Word” throughout his career. Because of the importance that Luther puts on it, it is likewise important for us to achieve a full understanding of what this ministry entails, both during this phase in Luther’s development and beyond.

Luther bases all other duties on the ministry of the Word: “Certainly these are splendid and royal duties. But the first and foremost of all on which everything else

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{62} WA 11:409 (LW 39: 206).
\textsuperscript{63} Luther, \textit{De Instituendis}, WA 12:189 (LW 40:34).
\textsuperscript{64} WA 12:180 (LW 40:21).
\end{flushright}
depends, is the teaching of the Word of God." He also considers it to be the highest office in the church and to belong to all Christians, “not only by right, but by command.” In the *De Instituendis Ministris*, the ministry of the Word refers to proclaiming the wonderful or marvelous deeds of God. One should preach and teach the Word so people remember God’s promises and his faithfulness in keeping them. (Luther uses a number of related terms to refer to this ministry—as he does also for the universal priesthood. With regard to the ministry, he equates “office of ministry” with the “office of preaching” [Predigamt], a conflation that occurs quite often throughout Luther’s writings. We will examine this usage later in this chapter.)

Other writings during this time shed more light on the ministry of the Word. On Pentecost Tuesday in 1522 Luther preached from John 10:1–11. The sermon sheds light onto the nature of true preachers and their preaching. We also get a window into what would constitute a “false preacher.”

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68 John 10:1–11: “I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.’ Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again, ‘I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.’” [NIV].
In the first sermon, Luther presents the hearer with six important points relative to the ministry of the Word. First, those who preach the Word must be regularly called. This issue of call is an important one. Luther does not make a distinction here between those called by a local congregation or a called by an appointed authority—the important point here is that one is called and does not take the office upon oneself.69

Luther distinguishes between a “public” and “private” call and clarifies that, while each Christian is responsible for his or her “private” ministry, he is here speaking of those who have been appointed to public ministry. This discussion of public versus private will come up again later in this chapter.

The second requirement of those who are preaching is that they preach nothing but the Word, “that no rival or supplementary doctrine be introduced nor another word be taught than Christ has taught.”70 No doubt Luther is addressing many of the papal “additions” to Scripture that he dealt with in the treatises of 1520—ordination, vows, and so on. Christ must stay central here.

The third requirement is that preachers should be able to distinguish between and correctly use both the law and the Gospel. The importance of Luther’s dialectic between law and Gospel has been written about countless times and will not be detailed here.71 What is important to note for our purposes is that understanding it and preaching it


71 See, e.g., Althaus, *Theology*, 251–73.
appropriately mattered to Luther. The law, designed to come first, reveals humanity’s hopelessness and prepares the way for the Gospel. The job of the law is to reveal to the heart its sins until it is completely humbled.\textsuperscript{72} Once the law has pierced the heart, the Gospel, the promise of God, the promise of forgiveness of sins, enters. The Gospel transforms the heart and brings joy where it was once crushed by the Law.\textsuperscript{73} One must not confuse the two—the law brings death, but the Gospel brings life. The Roman Church, according to Luther, was doing just this—confusing the two; there was no good news, everything had become law.

The fourth requirement is more of a principle. Luther emphasizes that preachers are not to compel anyone to believe. It is God’s Word, not human’s, that accomplishes salvation. Luther points out that Christ came and died freely, so those who follow him should follow him freely rather than being compelled by the sword.\textsuperscript{74}

The fifth and sixth points could be directed at both pastors and listeners or parishioners. First, hearers have the right to examine and judge a sermon. If the preacher is not preaching the right Gospel the congregation has the right and power to get rid of him.\textsuperscript{75} The most important test for exercising one’s office correctly is the preaching of the promise of God in Christ. Second, Luther gives the marks of “false preachers.” As could be deduced, “false preachers” are those who preach only the law and not the Christian

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} WA 10:1.2:292 (Lenker, \textit{Sermons} 3:381).
\textsuperscript{75} WA 10:1.2:290 (Lenker, \textit{Sermons} 3:379).
liberty of the Gospel.\textsuperscript{76} Preachers are to free and guide the sheep with the Gospel and not “bind them further” with the law.\textsuperscript{77}

The ministry of the Word refers above all to the preaching of the Gospel rather than the law. The preaching of the righteousness of Christ is rightly put over the righteousness of the law.\textsuperscript{78} The office of ministry is an “office of Christ and not of Moses, an office of grace and not of Law.”\textsuperscript{79} Luther also distinguishes between public and private preaching, the former being for those called to the “office of ministry” and the latter for each Christian in their own homes and for their own friends.\textsuperscript{80} I will examine this distinction in greater detail later in this section. While Luther employs the distinction, all believers have the responsibility to preach the Gospel.

A return to \textit{Das eyn Christliche versamlung odder gemeyne recht und macht habe, alle lere tzu urteylen unde lerer zu beruffen, eyn und abzusetzen, Grund und ursach aus der schrifft} (That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the right and Power to Judge all Teachings and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture) is helpful here as it complements Luther’s sermon of the same year.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{76} WA 10:1:2:292 (Lenker, \textit{Sermons} 3:381).

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{78} Luther, \textit{De Captivitate}, WA 6:567 (LW 36:116).

\textsuperscript{79} Martin Luther, \textit{Contra Latomum} (1521), WA 8:71 (LW 32:178).

\textsuperscript{80} Luther uses the Latin \textit{privatus} for private and \textit{publicus} for public;—Martin Luther, \textit{De Instituendis} (1523), WA 12:181 (LW 40:23). The definitions have the connotation of “official government business” or “general public” for \textit{publicus}. \textit{Privatus} has the connotation of “private life,” “private person,” or “at home.”

\textsuperscript{81} Martin Luther, WA 11:408-416 (LW 39:305-314).
Luther instructs the believers at Leisnig that the Gospel is central to any church, regardless of its religious identity: monastery, etc. With the Gospel present, every Christian has the right to interpret and judge it. The power to judge teachings from the Word has been given to every Christian equally and not to bishops, scholars, and councils. Here he quotes John 10:4,5, “My sheep know my voice. My sheep do not follow strangers, but flee from them, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” All teachers are to be called on the basis of their gift of preaching the Gospel rightly. The Word is not the property of the spiritual estate, but of every Christian. Every Christian has the responsibility of protecting and promoting the Word.

In expounding on Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 14:26, Luther points out that the ministry of the Word is not exclusive to public preaching.

Paul confirms this . . . as he speaks not to the shorn or to the few, but to the whole church and each individual Christian: “Each one of you has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.” And further on: “For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged.” 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.

82 WA 11:408 (LW 39:305).
“Ministry of the Word” thus refers to the communication of the heart of the Gospel—righteousness through Christ alone— including public preaching. One does need a special calling for the public preaching of the Word. The other aspects of the ministry, like the keys (binding and loosing of sins), Luther speaks of as a responsibility that Christians have to one another.

What is clear here is that the ministry of the Word is not just for those who are called out but for all Christians. It is also more than just preaching—it is everything that proclaims the promise of Christ. That responsibility is the same for those who are called to the public office of ministry and for those who proclaim privately.

*Responsibilities over Sacraments (Baptism and Eucharist)*

The administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper is another responsibility of the priesthood and therefore of the universal priesthood. Baptism is a part of the “life-giving Word of God that renews souls and redeems from death and sins” and is the responsibility of all believers, whether they have tonsure and episcopal “character” or not.86 Luther points to the fact that the Catholics have in the case of necessity allowed women to baptize. When they do so, even though they are laity, Luther says that they

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86 Luther, *De Instituendis*, WA 12:181 (LW 40:23).
“exercise the function of the priesthood legitimately, and do it not as a private act, but as a part of the public ministry of the church which belongs only to the priesthood.” 87

The same requirement applies to the administration of the Lord’s Supper. There is no difference between the two; one sacrament is not greater than another—they are all from God. For Luther, the reserving of this sacrament for the hands of the priests serves only to “increase his awe and admiration before his own dignity and power. Is this not making an elephant out of a fly?” 88 If women can perform baptism, they can also oversee the Lord’s Supper, as they also are a part of the priesthood. I will discuss Luther’s limits on the public practice of both baptism and the Lord’s Supper later in this section.

**Praying for One Another**

Luther observes that Christ gave the Lord’s Prayer to “all his Christians.” 89 But if Christ gave all Christians this prayer, then why do the priests reserve prayer for themselves? “For they preach that it is given to all and yet they have arrogated the function or priesthood of prayer to themselves alone, depriving others of it. For what does it mean to say, ‘we alone are priests, you are lay,’ except, ‘we alone are Christians and can pray. You are Gentiles who cannot pray but can be aided by our prayers?” 90

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87 Ibid. “Itace et mulieres, dum baptisant, legitimo funguntur sacerdotio, idque non privato opere, sed publico et Ecclesiastico ministerio, quod ad solum sacerdotem pertinet.”


89 WA 12:186 (LW 40:30). “Christus enim omnibus suis Christianis orationem illam dominicam tradidit.”

90 Ibid. “Dum eam omnibus communem et ipsi praedicarent, et tamen orandi officium ceu sacerdotale sibi solis ipsis arrogarent, omnibus aliis adimerent. Quid enim est dicere: ‘Nos soli sumus
Christians intercede for each other in prayer. Every Christian has the right and responsibility to have direct access to God and stand for others in the presence of God.  

*Sacrificing for One Another (Bearing Burdens for Each Other)*

All Christians, Luther says referring to Romans 12:1, have the responsibility of presenting themselves as living sacrifices, just as Christ sacrificial his body on the cross.  

This sacrifice is not meant as physical death but as a spiritual sacrifice, as mentioned in 1 Peter 2:5.  

The Roman priesthood’s sacrifice is not a proper sacrifice at all. Since only spiritual sacrifices are expected, they can only be offered by those who possess the Word.  

Luther compares the spiritual sacrifice of true Christians with that of Abel:

But in the church nothing at all counts unless the person first be acceptable, as Abel was, and he was in God’s favor, not by sacrifice, but by faith and spirit. So they must confess that since their sacrificing priests to a large extent are not spiritual, and that they are not sacrificing priests in the church unless they are spiritual, their sacrifice clearly is not one that belongs to the church but to the realm of human falsehood.

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sacerdotes, vos estis laici,' nisi id: Nos soli sumus Christiani et orare potentes, Vos gentes et non orare, sed nostris orationibus iuvari potentes?”

91 WA 12:186 (LW 40:30).

92 WA 12:185 (LW 40:28). Rom. 12:1 “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”

93 Luther, *De Instituendis*, WA 12:185 (LW 40:29). 1 Pet. 2:5 [NIV]. “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

94 Ibid.

95 Luther, *De Instituendis*, WA 12:186 (LW 40:29). “In Ecclesia nihil placeat prorsus, nisi persona primum ipsa, sicut Abel, grata fuerit, haec autem fit fide et spiritu, non sacrificio. Proinde cum ipsim et fateri cogantur, suos sacrificia saltem magna ex parte spirituales non esse, et in Ecclesia, nisi
What Luther has in mind is not a Donatist view that, on the basis of the character of the minister, would question the reality of the sacrament as a divine gift, but of the fallacy of a false understanding of the Mass as a sacrifice. The key here is to put the emphasis regarding the effectual nature of baptism, eucharist, or even absolution on God and not on the human character.

Judging Doctrines and Spirits

Paul spends a great deal of time in the book of Galatians chastising the church for its lack of wisdom. Paul is concerned that they have not learned how to distinguish between the freedom of the Gospel and the law. As he often does, Luther picks up on Paul’s emphasis on each Christian’s responsibility to judge what is spiritually right and wrong. The Roman priesthood has falsely reserved this right and privilege for themselves. All Christians are not just permitted but also required to exercise this function. Once again, Luther turns to Paul to defend his point. Quoting 1 Corinthians

spirituales sint, sacrifices non sunt, certum est eorum sacrificium non Ecclesiasticum, sed mendacium humanum esse.”

96 Ibid. Gal. 2:14 [NIV]: “When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the Gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, ‘You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?’” Gal. 1:8: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a Gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!”

97 Luther, De Instituendis, WA 12:188 (LW 40:32).
14:32, Luther points out “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets”; he likewise cites verse 31, “You can all prophesy, one by one.”

The Roman priesthood, Luther says, appeals to human wisdom to protect its privilege and office, but true Christians appeal to the wisdom of God. This wisdom allows all to understand true or false doctrine, just as Christ’s anointing has taught all Christians about everything:

We have then altogether the same rights. For if we have in common the name of brethren, then one cannot be especially superior to the other or enjoy more of heritage or authority than the other in spiritual matters, of which we now are speaking. So not only do we have the right to recover this function of judging doctrine, as well as all the other functions we have mentioned, but unless we recover it we are denying Christ as brother.

*Binding and Loosing of Sins (the Keys)*

Christ’s words to Peter in the Gospel of Matthew are the basis of the keys. The church had long believed that it possessed the power of the keys, as it inherited them from Christ through Peter. Codified as an article of faith by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), it was accepted that ordained priests had the power to hear confession and

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98 Ibid.: “Et iterum: ‘Spiritus prophetarum subiecti sunt enim per singulos prophetare.’”

99 1 John 2:27.


101 Matt. 18:18 [NIV]. See below in chapter four.

provide absolution. The distinction between the spiritual and the temporal estates meant that only priests had the right, responsibility, and power to exercise the power of the keys. For Luther this responsibility now extended to every baptized believer. Luther articulated his new understanding in his 1519 treatise *Eyn Sermon von dem Sacrament der pusz* (*The Sacrament of Penance*): “Now this authority to forgive sins is nothing other than what a priest, indeed, if need be, any Christian, may say to another when he sees him afflicted or affrighted in his sins. He can joyously speak this verdict, “take heart, your sins are forgiven” [Matt. 2:9]. And whoever accepts this and believes it as a word of God, his sins are forgiven.”

The effectiveness of the keys is much like that of baptism—solely dependent on the Word. The power of the keys come from faith in Christ and not on the qualifications of the one who exercises the keys. A fuller explanation of the doctrine of the keys, its history, development, and central importance to the universal priesthood, will be given in the next chapter.

Phase two continues to develop the universal priesthood while introducing and developing the office of ministry. Throughout the phase Luther emphasizes the distinction between public and private ministry for the office and for the universal priesthood. The significance of this section comes in that Luther specifically defines

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103 This belief was based on several other biblical texts: Matt. 9:1–8; 16:13–20; 18:15–20; Mark 2:1–12; Luke 5:17-26.

what the responsibilities of the office and universal priesthood are. These definitions will be essential as we move forward in the study.

Phase Three: Challenges to the Office and the Universal Priesthood (1524–1529)

In the first two phases, Luther gave the doctrine of the universal priesthood its evangelical definition and form. Challenges from Rome as well as reactions from the emerging radical wing of the Reformation in the following years led Luther both to affirm the universal priesthood and to emphasize the need and importance of the office of ministry. According to Luther, both of these aspects of ministry have been established by Scripture and fill complementary roles. During this phase Luther will see direct (and personal) challenges to his understandings of the office and the universal priesthood. These challenges will help us further define Luther’s own understanding.

External events forced Luther to clarify and develop his position during this third phase. The first of these was the peasant unrest that occurred in and around Wittenberg. The second was the rise and influence of the schwärmer or enthusiasts. Luther was forced to make strategic adjustments to his discussion of the office of ministry with subsequent implications for the universal priesthood. Two points come to light through this third phase and the related writing. First, the necessity of a proper call became more and more important to Luther. Second, Luther affirmed that the temporal office was divinely ordained and could take precedence over the universal priesthood, specifically in the area of order.

Proper Call to Ministry: Karlstadt and Muntzer
The expansion of the Reformation and the mixture of sociopolitical realities in Germany and surrounding lands brought challenges to Luther’s theology and its application.\(^{105}\) Luther wrote the treatise *Wider die himmlischen Propheten, von den Bildern und Sakrament (Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments)* (1525) in response and reply to the growing influence of those like Karstadt, Muntzer, and Zwingli—those Luther referred to as *Schwärmer* or enthusiasts. Luther deals with a variety of different issues here, but primarily with the question of sacraments, the primacy of the Word, and church/government authority.\(^{106}\) Luther’s words on authority are particularly germane to our study.

Luther’s concern over the *Schwärmer* has been well documented.\(^{107}\) Their claims to direct access to the Holy Spirit and relative denigration of the external word and sacraments were the central point upon which Luther opposed them. Closely allied with this critique is Luther’s objection that many of the *Schwärmer* lack a legitimate call to ministry. One of the distinctives of the church for Luther (mentioned above) was that the person filling the office of ministry should have a legitimate call. Without a right call, one cannot be an official public representative of the local church. This is Luther’s complaint with both Karlstadt and Muntzer’s “heavenly prophets”: they teach God’s


Word without a rightful office. With no call there is no accountability for them. They are thus able to undermine local pastors and lead the congregants astray.

Luther’s complaint against Karlstadt, however, extends beyond mere preaching without a call. Karlstadt is guilty of two things in Luther’s eyes. First, preaching without a call. Second, *ignoring* his existing call—particularly the fact that it came from the civil authorities.

Dr. Karlstadt has brought this trouble and misfortune upon himself, in my opinion, in as much as he carries on his enterprise without a call while willfully leaving his own calling. For he has forced himself on Orlamunde as a wolf. For this reason it was impossible for him to do any good there. He was appointed to Wittenberg on a royally endowed income, as an archdeacon, to preaching God’s Word, lecture, and dispute. God had sent him there, and he agreed to discharge his responsibilities. He did serve for a time . . . then he wantonly left and went to Orlamunde without the knowledge and consent of either the prince or the university. He drove out the pastor who by order of the prince and university privilege was placed to be there.108

While Luther is concerned about Karlstadt’s call, we see here a second concern beyond Karlstadt: the role of the government or other authoritative bodies in the appointment of local pastors. Up until this point (see the first two phases), Luther has made it clear that it is the local congregation that calls a pastor, unless there is an extreme circumstance, in which case they are to look to the local government. But in light of the

108 Luther, *Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, WA 18:94 (LW 40:111). “Ynn disse unrad und unglueck hat D. Carlstad bracht, acht ich, das er unberuffen seyn ding thut und seyn beruffen3 mutwilliglich faren lies, Denn er hat sich zu Orlamuende alls eyn wolff eyngedrungen. Darumb war es nicht mueglich, das er was gutts solt anfahen, Er war auff furstliche stifftung und rendten zu Wittemberg verordenet, eyn Archidiacon, der Gotts wort predigen, lesen und disputiren solt5, da hat yhn Gott hyn gefoddert, und er sich auch verpflichtet, wie er denn eyne zeytlang . . . Da brach er auff aus eygnem frevel und zoch gen Orlamuende hynder wissen und willen beyde des fursten und der Universitet und treyb aus den pfarher da selbst, so durch furstliche ordnung und der Universitet recht daselbst hyn gesetzt war, und nympyt die pffarr mit eygner gewalt eyn.”
upheaval that is occurring all around him, Luther sees the need for some further clarification of order.

Karlstadt’s “call” to Orlamunde is an example of this need for clarification. Luther believes that while the congregation “called” Karlstadt, which was their right, they did not correctly exercise their right to appoint. Luther believes that Karlstadt persuaded them to drive out their pastor. \(^{109}\) Luther makes two points here. First, either the prince or the university funded the pastorate at Orlamunde. The money did not belong to the congregation. By running their pastor out and appointing a new one, they were wrongly using someone else’s money for their needs. \(^{110}\) If the prince or the university provides the funds, then it is their right to appoint whomever they want to that position. Furthermore, if the church had a complaint, then they could rightly have petitioned the authorities who fund the office to give them a Christian pastor. If they were refused a Christian pastor, then they could proceed to call their own pastor, but not before. \(^{111}\) In sum, the church had the right to call but is subject to the oversight of the local government or religious authorities.

*Fundamental Rights to Call Own Pastor: Admonition to Peace: Reply to Twelve Articles*

Later in 1525, Luther reiterated his position in *Ermahnung zum Frieden auf die zwölf Artikel der Bauernschaft in Schwaben (Admonition to Peace: Reply to the Twelve*
The “Twelve Articles” referred to the summary of the peasant demands in 1524 and 1525. The first article is the most interesting for us. In it the peasants request the ability to both call and depose their own pastor. Luther writes his reply, the *Admonition*, to both the princes and the peasants. First, he encourages the princes to take the rebellion seriously, to ease their demands on the peasants, and to change their ways so they do not find themselves in this situation again. Second, he affirms the peasants’ right to call their own pastor, but with qualification much like that in *Heavenly Prophets*. If they want their own pastor, they must pay for him themselves, using no government money. If they are using government funds, they must accept the pastor who is assigned them by the authorities as long as he is preaching the Word of God rightly.

Luther increasingly emphasizes the office of ministry in this phase, while at the same time affirms the universal priesthood (right to call own pastor). The office is one that has to be properly filled – one may not “sneak in” and take an office. When this does happen, it is the job of the congregation (here Orlamunde) to get rid of the intruder and choose their own. Luther’s experience with rogue preachers leads him to develop a higher view of the office of ministry, but not at the expense of the universal priesthood. This

114 WA 18:293 (LW 46:10).
development of both doctrines continue to help understand Luther’s doctrine and help to build the argument of the importance of the universal priesthood.

Phase Four: Continued Development of the Office and the Universal Priesthood (1530–546)

As the reform was successfully spreading through Germany, Luther and others were ordaining new evangelical pastors. Luther’s church visitations in the late 1520s presented important information on the spiritual and educational status of the newly reformed churches. Later in life, Luther was faced with the challenge of how to sustain these new evangelical provincial churches. As Lohse points out, no bishop in the German Empire attached himself to the Reformation. Luther was thus forced to undertake the serious problem of caring for congregations. To solve the problem, Luther had to act decisively. In many cases, he appealed to emergency privilege for direct installation of bishops. During this fourth and final period, we see a continued development of the office of ministry with very little direct and specific development of the universal priesthood. We will look at both of these in turn. Of particular interest is Luther’s call upon “emergency bishops” (Notbischöfe) and his understanding of what qualified as an emergency.

117 Lohse, Theology, 288.
Development of the Office of Ministry

The need for qualified pastors and bishops to perform public ministry in the church was very high. Nowhere is this better seen than in Luther’s 1530 writing titled *Eine Predigt, das man Kinder zur Schulen halten solle* (*A Sermon on Keeping Children in School*). Luther wrote this sermon in response to a decreased interest in education among parents and their children. Essentially, parents saw no need for their children to continue in school if it would not help them in developing their trade (e.g., blacksmith, etc). If they were not going to be a pastor or teacher, there was no point. This attitude angers Luther for two reasons. First, he blames parents for being consumed with materialism. They should be encouraging their children to value and invest in education. Second, when parents focus merely on the temporal needs of the child they miss their larger task of offering their children to the service of God. Without education there will be no men ready for the task of the office of ministry, which will mean that the office will go to ruin. Education guarantees a continuous pool of eligible men who can fulfill the office of ministry if they are so called. Luther takes it a step further. Obviously not every male will be called to the office, but that does not mean their education will have gone to waste. They will be prepared to serve in any capacity that the pastor asks them to serve in, step into the role in the case of an emergency (if the pastor is not

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119 WA 30II:527 (LW 46:223).

120 Ibid.
available), and they will be better leaders of their family, as they will be able to lead the family in Bible reading, prayer, and so on,

Even though a boy who has studied Latin should afterward learn a trade and become a craftsman, he still stands as ready reserve in case he should be needed as a pastor or in some other service of the word. Neither will such knowledge hurt his capacity to earn a living. On the contrary, he can rule his house all the better because of it, and besides, he is prepared for the office of preacher or pastor if he should be needed there.  

Luther continues on his theme of proper call in his 1532 publication *Ein Brief D. Martin Luthers von den Schleichern und Winkelpredigern (Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers).* Written in response to Anabaptist preachers showing up in and around Eisenach to preach, Luther once again emphasizes how important a particular call is for preaching publicly. Much as he has done in previous phases, Luther argues that the preachers must come publicly to the parish priests, make their call clear, and then ask for permission to preach publicly. Again, Luther’s concern is for the public and orderly preaching of the Word. 

In this last phase Luther again emphasized that the office of ministry was a central requirement of any church. In his 1539 publication *Von Den Conciliis und Kirchen (On Councils and Church)*, Luther emphasizes the ultimate importance of the office. The

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121 WA 30II:546 (LW 46:231-232). “Und wenn schon ein solcher knabe, so latin gelernt hat, dann wenn ein handwerck lernt und burger wird, hat man den selbigen jm vorrat, ob man sein etwa zum Pfarher odder sonst zum wort brauchen musste, schadet jhm auch solche lere nichts zur narung, kan sein haus deste bas regieren und ist uber das zugerecht und bereit zum predig ampt odder pfarr ampt, wo man sein bedarff,”


office is an external sign of the church. Every church needs one person who is allowed to preach, baptize, absolve, and administer the sacrament: “Now wherever you find these offices or officers, you may be assured that the holy Christian people are there; for the church cannot be without these bishops, pastors, preachers, priests; and conversely they cannot be without the church. Both must be together.”

Luther’s development of the office here in the fourth phase helps us, in a backwards way, to understand the role and importance of the universal priesthood. The responsibilities are the same, but the difference is public and private. The office is a central mark of the church. As we will see, so will the priesthood and its practice of absolution.

Development of the Universal Priesthood

Luther’s emphasis on the office in the last phase should not overshadow the great amount of space he gives to the universal priesthood. The priesthood, as said above, is not just a right, but it carries with it responsibilities. Here we will look at the development of the universal priesthood and see how important it is in three separate settings for Luther. This importance continues to develop my thesis of how important the doctrine is to Luther.

Returning to his comments in Ein Brief D. Martin Luthers von den Schleichern und Winkelpredigern (Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers) we see that Luther does

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124 Martin Luther, Von den Consiliis und Kirchen (1539), WA 50:641 (LW 41:164). “Wo du nu solche Empter oder Amptleute sihest, da wisse, das gewislich das heilige Christliche Volck sein mus, Denn die Kirche kan on solche Bisschove, Pfarrher, Prediger, Priester nicht sein, Und widerumb sie auch nicht on die Kirche, sie muessen bey einander sein.”
have something to say about the universal priesthood. One element of particular interest for this study is the responsibility he puts on the local congregation as well as on the temporal government. While Luther chastises the preachers for not having a call, he also criticizes the congregation for not challenging the preachers and asking where their call came from. Luther says that the congregation should not only question their call but also point the preacher to their pastor. He goes so far as to say that they are “duty bound” to do so. 

Luther emphasizes here, just as he has in previous phases, that “judging doctrine and spirits” is the responsibility of all Christians. While the office is important, the responsibility of the congregation is central to the protection of the church in this case.

Luther is much more direct in his praise and emphasis on the importance of the universal priesthood in *Von der Winckelmesse und Pfaffen Weyhe (The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests)* (1533). Luther absolutely affirms the role of the office of ministry as necessary for making public sacrifices and preaching for the whole community. At the same time he emphasizes that those called to the office are not special spiritually, they have no *character indelebilis*. While the public office is legitimate, the rest of the Christians by right of their baptism have their own priesthood: “So we are not only true clerics and priests according to our right as children but also according to our right as brothers. This, our hereditary priesthood with which we are

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born, we do not want to have taken away, impeded and obscured.”¹²⁸ Luther then goes on to point out that the term *sacerdos* (Latin for “priest”) is not used in New Testament for any apostle or other office. The name is given solely to baptized Christians.¹²⁹

Two more documents help to clarify Luther’s understanding of the priesthood in his latter years. The first is his *Predigt über den 110. Psalm* (*Commentary on Psalm 110*) from 1535.¹³⁰ The second is *Predigt am 17. Sonntag nach Trinitas, bei der Einweihung der Schloßkirche zu Torgau gehalten* (*Sermon at the Dedication of Castle Church, Torgau*) from 1544.¹³¹ Luther reaffirms what he stated in *Von der Winckelmess* in his commentary on Psalm 110. The preaching office is important, but it doesn’t eliminate the importance of the universal priesthood,

The preaching office is no more than a public service which happens to be conferred upon someone by the whole congregation, all the members of which are priests. . . . After we have become Christians . . . each one, according to his calling and position, obtains the right and the power of teaching and confessing before others this Word. . . . Even though not everybody has the public office and calling, every Christian has the right to teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and rebuke his neighbor with the Word of God at every opportunity and whenever necessary.¹³²


¹²⁹ Ibid.


Individual Christians outside of the called preaching office have their own real responsibilities to God.

Luther was invited to speak at the opening of the Castle Church at Torgau in 1544. This wasn’t just any church in Torgau, but the first new church to be built in Saxony since the beginnings of the reform.¹³³ For the occasion Luther preached on Luke 14:1-11. Luther comments that the Sabbath was fixed for the Jewish people and a special “tribe” was appointed for worship on those days.¹³⁴ Now, for those who are in the kingdom of Jesus, they are not bound to a single day, time, or place.¹³⁵ Additionally, there is no longer a special “tribe” or group of people who lead worship. Luther refers here to 1 Peter 2:9: “Rather we are all priests as is written in I Peter 2:9; so that all of us should proclaim God’s Word and works at every time and in every place . . . .”¹³⁶ Luther continues to affirm the importance of the laity. He says that baptism is the common possession of all Christians, just like the Word. When a child is baptized, it isn’t just the pastor who is baptizing, “Thus, when a child is baptized, this done not only by the pastor,

¹³³ John W. Doberstein, Introduction to Sermon at the Dedication of Castle Church, Torgau (1544), LW 51:333.

¹³⁴ WA 49:590 (LW 51:335).

¹³⁵ Ibid.

but also the sponsors, who are the witnesses, indeed, for the whole church. For baptism, just like the Word and Christ himself, is the common possession of all Christians.”

Luther here emphasizes the great importance of the universal priesthood. He does so in no less than four situations. Scanning across the dates of Luther’s writings that we have seen so far, there is nothing that fundamentally changes or contradicts what he has previously said. The doctrine is central to him: it neither overshadows or gets overshadowed by the office of ministry.

Luther’s development of both the universal priesthood and the office of ministry does lead to the fundamental question: what is the relationship between the two and how do they co-exist with one another. These questions will be examined in the next section.

Universal Priesthood and the Office of Ministry

In 1539 Luther completed his lengthy treatise *Von den Consiliis und Kirchen* (*On the Councils and the Church*). This work “represents his final judgment concerning the medieval church as well as the first broad foundation for a new doctrine of the church within nascent Lutheranism.”

The treatise is divided into three parts. The first part argues that the damage to the church is too deep to be reformed by any further councils or directives from the church. The second part examines the importance of the early councils. In this section Luther concludes that councils can protect the church from error.

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137 WA 49:600 (LW 51:343). “Also das en kindling getaufft wird, das thut nicht allein der Pfarher, sondern auch die Baten als zeugen, ja die gantze Kirche, Denn die Tauffe gleich wie das Wort Christus selbs ist ein gemein gut alle Christen.”

but do not have the authority to create new articles of faith.\textsuperscript{139} In the third part, Luther enumerates for the reader the true marks of the church according to the Scriptures. The marks are these: the preaching of the Word, the Sacrament of Baptism, The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the public exercise of the Office of the Keys, the Office of ministry, prayer and thanksgiving to God, and lastly suffering.\textsuperscript{140}

This section of the study will examine the development of the office of ministry. The significance of this examination for my study is two-fold. First, Luther’s development of the office of ministry helps us to understand its relationship to the universal priesthood. Second, it lays out the responsibility of the universal priesthood as equal to the office of ministry.

\textit{Characteristics of the Office}

The office of ministry has certain characteristics that distinguish it from the universal priesthood. These characteristics help to define both the universal priesthood as well as the office of ministry. This study will follow Bernard Lohse’s summary of Luther’s thoughts on the characteristics of the office.\textsuperscript{141}

\textbf{Public versus Private}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{139} Councils: Jerusalem (Acts 15), Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451).
\bibitem{140} Luther, \textit{Von den Consiliis}, WA 50:624–53 (LW 41:143–78).
\bibitem{141} Lohse, \textit{Theology}, 293–95.
\end{thebibliography}
The ministerial office handles the public proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. “Public” means two things. First, that the office is considered as *coram ecclesiae* (“in the presence of the church”) and *nomine ecclesiae* (“in the name of the church”). Second, that the ministerial office is always related to a specific congregation. As he says in *De instituendis ministris Ecclesiae* (*On the Ministry*),

For since we have proved all of these things to be the common property of all Christians, no one individual can arise by his own authority and arrogate to himself alone what belongs to all. . . . But the community rights demand that one, or as many as the community chooses, shall be chosen or approved who, in the name of all with these rights, shall perform these functions publicly. Otherwise there might be shameful confusion among the people of God.

He emphasizes this as well in his sermon on the Magnificat:

But you say: “What? Does this mean that no one should teach anything except in public? Should not the head of a household teach his servants in his house or keep a pupil or someone there who recites to him?” Answer: Of course that is all right and in its proper place here. The head of every family has the duty of training and teaching his children and servants, or of having them taught. In his house he is like a minister or bishop over his household, and he has the command to supervise what they learn and to be responsible for them. But you have no right to do this outside your own household and to force yourself upon other households or upon your neighbors.

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142 Hellmut Lieberg. *Amt und Ordination bei Luther and Melanchthon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1962), 69–74. Also see the discussion of public and private earlier in this chapter.


144 Luther, *Reihenpredigten über Matthäus 5-7*, WA 32:303 (LW 21:8). “Sprichstu aber Wie? sol denn niemand nichts leren, es geschehe denn öffentlich, odder solt ein hausvater jm sein haus sein gesind nicht leren odder einen schuler odder andern bey sich halten der jn furlese? Antwort: Trawn ia, das ist auch wolgethan, dazu ein rechter rawm und stedt dazu, Denn ein iglicher hausvater ist schuldig, das er sein kind
In this extended passage Luther makes it clear that private teaching may take place, but he allows for it only in homes and done by heads of households, presumably fathers.

Luther again addresses the enthusiasts’ issue here. No one should be allowed to teach publicly unless they show that they have the specific call of a local congregation.

Nor should you put up with it if some such sneak comes to you and sets up a special preaching-meeting in your household for which he has no authorization. If someone comes into a house or city, let him be required to furnish proof that he is known, or let him show by letter and seal that he has proper authorization. Not every vagabond is to be believed who boasts that he has the Holy Spirit and who uses this to insinuate himself into this or that household. In short, this means that the Gospel or proclamation should not be listened to in a corner, but high up on a mountain and openly in the free daylight. That is the first thing that Matthew wants to show here. 145

Each person should have a public call or be a head of a household if they want to preach the Word of God. Luther does allow for emergency situations where a pastor is not available: individuals stranded alone in the wilderness, imprisoned, or any situation where an individual or group is without a church or pastor who is called to serve them.

145 Luther, *Reihenpredigten über Matthäus 5-7*, WA 32:303–4 (LW 21:8). “Solt auch nicht leiden, das jrgent ein schleicher zu dir kome und jm deinem haus ein sonderlichs mache mit predigen das jm nicht befolen ist. Kompt aber einer jnn ein haus odder stad, so heis man jn zeugnis bringen, das er bekand sey odder sigel und briff zeigen, das ers befelh habe. Denn man mus nicht allen streichern glewben, die sich des heiligen geists rhumen und sich damit hin und her jnn ander heusser drehen. Kurtz Es heisset, das Euangelium odder predigamt sol nicht jm winckel, sondern hoch empor auffm berg und frey offentlich am liecht sich lassen horen. Das ist eines das hie Mattheus wil anzeigen.”
Luther considers these unique and exceptions to the rule. The distinction between public and private was essential to the life of the church.

For the Sake of Order

If every baptized Christian exercised the rights due to the spiritual priesthood, the result would obviously be chaos. The task of public proclamation is therefore given to individual Christians. Luther expands on this idea in a 1522 sermon (published in 1523) on 1 Peter:

Now Christ is the High and Chief Priest anointed by God Himself. He also sacrificed His own body for us, which is the highest function of the priestly office. Then He prayed for us on the cross. In the third place, He also proclaimed the Gospel and taught all men to know God and Him Himself. These three offices He also gave to all of us. Consequently, since He is the Priest and we are His brothers, all Christians have the authority, the command, and the obligation to preach, to come before God, to pray for one another, and to offer themselves as a sacrifice to God. Nevertheless, no one should undertake to preach or to declare the Word of God unless he is a priest.

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146 Martin Luther, Vorlesung über Psalm 51 (1532), WA 40:315–470 (LW 12:331). This is in seeming contradiction to Luther’s words on Psalm 110:—“Such people are to be chosen by the church only for the sake of the office. They are to be separated from the common Mass of Christians in the same way as in secular government, where certain people of the citizenry or municipality are chosen and appointed as officials. 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. To take another illustration, a wife, the mistress of a house, does not become a woman by taking a husband. If she were not a woman already, the act of matrimony would never make a housewife out of her. No, she brings her female nature into matrimony, and then she receives the keys to the house. The same thing is true of any other calling or office, e.g., father, mother, teacher, government. The office does not make the man; but a man must have the necessary qualifications, either by birth or training, before he fills the office. It is in accordance with God’s creation that we must first be born as human beings, men or women; thereafter He assigns to each his office or position as He will.”

147 Lohse, Theology, 293.

The enthusiast controversy is a prime example of Luther’s desire to have order. In his sermon on the Magnificat, Luther makes it clear that public preaching needs to come with a public call from a church. Three circumstances may have contributed to Luther’s development in this direction. First was the Wittenberg unrest (1521–1522). These events had shown what could happen when uneducated people imagined themselves to be equal to educated clergy. Second, was the rise of enthusiasts, like Muntzer. The enthusiasts claimed to have access to the Spirit outside the “means” of the Word. They were then preaching and “twist[ing] the Scripture or oral Word according to their pleasure.” Third, Luther was concerned about the breakdown of the churches

149 Martin Luther, *Reihenpredigten über Matthäus 5-7* (1530/1532), WA 32:304 (LW 21:8).

150 Green, “Changes,” 178.

151 *BekS* 453–54 (*BoC* 322). “Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts—that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure. Münzer did this, and many still do it in our day who wish to distinguish sharply between the letter and the spirit without knowing what they say or teach. The papacy, too, is nothing but enthusiasm, for the pope boasts that “all laws are in the shrine of his heart,” and he claims that whatever he decides and commands in his churches is spirit and law, even when it is above and contrary to the Scriptures or spoken Word.” “Ut ita praemuniamus nos adversum enthusiasmas, id est spiritus qui jactant se ante verbum et sine verbo spiritum habere et ideo scripturam sive vocale verbum judicant, flectunt et reflectunt pro libito, ut faciebat Monetarius et multi adhuc hodi, qui acute discernere volunt inter spiritum et literam et neutrum norunt nec, quid statuant sünd ciunt. Quid? Quod etiam papatus simpliciter est merus enthusiasmus, quo papa gloriatur omnia juda esse in scrinio sui pectoris et, quidquid ipse in ecclesia sua sentit et jubet, id spiritum et justum esse, etiamsi suptra contra scripturam et vocale verbum aliquid statuat et praecepit.” “Und in diesen stüden, so das mündlich äusserlich Wort betreffen, ist fest daurauf zu blieven, das Gott niemand seinen Geist oder Gnade gibt ohn durch oder mit dem vorgebend äusserlichem Wor, damit wir uns bewahren fur den Enthusiasten, das ist Geistern, so sich rühmen, ohn und bor dem wort den Geist zu haben, und darnach die Schrift oder mündlich Wort richten, duten und debnen ihres Gefallens, wie der Müntzer tät und noch viel tun heutigs Tages, die zwischen dem Geist und Buchstabens scharfe Richeter sein wollen und wissen nich, was sie sagen oden setzen; denn das Bapsttum ach eiten Enthusiasmus ist, darin der Bapst, rübet ‘alle Rechte sind im Schein.
during the visitation. The local priests were uneducated in the Gospel and the new teachings of the Reformation. Consequently, they were unable to instruct the people in even the simplest aspect of faith.\(^\text{152}\)

In 1530, Luther was faced with a new challenge. He was made aware that evangelical pastors were preaching in Catholic parishes. Luther pointed out that a pastor is never to offer his services in a neighboring parish unless he has a regular call there, regardless of how the local pastor or priest is carrying out his duties:

\begin{quote}
We have enough to do, if we just carry out that which has been committed to our own charge. Nor can one use the argument that all Christians are priests. It is true that Christians are priests, but they are not all pastors. Then over and above that he is a Christian and a priest, he must also have an office and a parish that has been committed to his charge. The call and the charge makes the pastor and preacher.\(^\text{153}\)
\end{quote}

Quite simply, for the sake of order, there needs to be an office of ministry that takes care of administrating the sacraments and preaching the Word—taking care of the totality of the office.

\begin{flushright}
Seines Herzen’ und ‘was er mitseiner Kircher urteilt und heizt, das soll Geist und Recht sein, wenn’s gleich über und wider die Schrift oder mündlich Wort ist.’"
\end{flushright}


\(^\text{153}\) WA 31I:11 (LW 13:195)
Divine Institution of the Ministerial Office

All legitimate offices [Ämter] are divinely instituted, including the ministerial office. Luther appeals to Paul for evidence of this (Eph. 4:11). In *Von den Conciliis* (On Council and Churches), Luther lays out his rationale.

There must be bishops, pastors, or preachers, who publicly and privately give, administer, and use the aforementioned four things or holy possessions in behalf of and in the name of the church, or rather by reason of their institution by Christ, as St. Paul states in Ephesians 4[:8], “He received gifts among men . . .”—his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some teachers and governors, etc. The people as a whole cannot do these things, but must entrust or have them entrusted to one person. Otherwise, what would happen if everyone wanted to speak or administer, and no one wanted to give way to the other? It must be entrusted to one person, and he alone should be allowed to preach, to baptize, to absolve, and to administer the sacraments. The others should be content with this arrangement and agree to it. Wherever you see this done, be assured that God’s people, the holy Christian people, are present.”

Luther’s concern is to dispel the idea that the office is created out of human ingenuity. As seen above, Luther rejects the Roman offices (pope, bishops, canons, and monks) as not being instituted by God, but nevertheless necessary for the church. These offices did

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154 Eph. 4:11: “And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.”


not come from Christ but from their own doing.\textsuperscript{157} Just as Christ was called to preach and fulfill his teaching office, so are those who are called by the local congregation.\textsuperscript{158}

The question of the origins of the office of ministry came up repeatedly throughout Luther’s career, and he vacillates between two poles. At times Luther claims that the origin of the office is found in Christ. At other times Luther claims that the origin comes from the general priesthood.\textsuperscript{159} A study of this issue will come later in this chapter.

Task: Proclamation of the Word of God and Sacraments

The primary tasks of the ministerial office are the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments:\textsuperscript{160} “I want to speak only of the ministry which God has instituted, the responsibility of which is to minister the word and sacrament to a congregation, among whom they reside.”\textsuperscript{161} The preaching of the Gospel is the preaching of the promise or testament of Christ. In his ongoing battle with Latomus, Luther argued

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{157} Luther, \textit{De Captivitate}, WA 6:505 (LW 36:112).
\textsuperscript{158} Luther, \textit{An den christlichen Adel}, WA 6:390 (LW 44:120).
\textsuperscript{159} For an example of a source for the priesthood coming from the general priesthood (or transferral theory), see \textit{De Instituendis Ministris Ecclesiae} WA 12:169-195 (LW 40:3-44). and also (Erste) Epistel S. Petri gepredigt und aufgelegt, WA 12:259-399 (LW 30:3-148) For divine institution, see \textit{Predict über den 110. Psalm} (Commentary on Psalm 110) \textit{Predict über den 110. Psalm} (Commentary on Psalm 11), WA 41:79-239 (LW 13:225-438).
\textsuperscript{160} Lohse, \textit{Theology}, 294.
\end{flushright}
that this office is of Christ, not Moses, and is for the purpose of preaching of the splendor of grace and not the law.\(^{162}\)

Luther considers any means by which the promise of God is communicated or witnessed to be proclamation. This includes the sacraments (Lord’s Supper and baptism) as well as forgiveness of sins (exercising the Keys). This is consistent with Luther’s emphasis that the Word accomplishes all things. As seen above, baptism is merely dunking in water without the guarantee of God’s promise through the Word. This applies to the Lord’s Supper as well. The significance of the elements is not in their physical status as bread and wine and as the body and blood of Christ but in the fact that they are pledges of the promises of Christ.\(^{163}\) While Luther does not consider penance to be a sacrament, since it lacks an external or outward sign, he still joins penance closely to the Word, as it is Christ’s words of forgiveness that are spoken to the penitent.

Unity of the Ministerial Office

Many forms of proclamation are manifestations of a single office of preaching. Gradations in the public exercise of the office are a matter of human arrangement. In making this distinction, Luther refers to conditions in the early church, where there was no difference between bishop and pastor.\(^{164}\) The pastor was the “bishop” of his congregation, and the bishop was the “pastor” of a larger area of pastors:


\(^{163}\) Luther, *Von den Consili*, WA 50:601 (LW 41:154).

\(^{164}\) Lohse, *Theology*, 294.
Forget about the present state of affairs, and bear in mind that when St. Peter and other apostles came into a city in which there were believers or Christians, they selected an elderly man or two who were upright, were married and had children, and were versed in Scripture. These men were called πρεσβύτεροι. Later Paul and Peter also called them επίσκοποι, that is, bishops. Therefore the words “bishop” and “priest” had one and the same meaning.\(^{165}\)

In other words, there is no difference in the power of consecration and no special ordination that gives a higher office than pastor. The offices are the same, but the function different.\(^{166}\)

The Legitimacy of the Office is a Matter of Function Rather Than of Special Status

The fulfilling of the duties of the office of ministry is the basis and confirmation of the possession of that office, not any special status. The preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are the central function of the office; if the sacraments are rightly administered then the office is being rightly filled and vice versa.

And if the individual is no longer preaching the Gospel, they have abandoned their office. At this point the local congregation has the right—and the responsibility—to dismiss them. Luther also allows for the possibility that the pastor may resign on his own.\(^{167}\)


\(^{166}\) Ibid.

\(^{167}\) *An Den christlichen*, WA 6:20 (LW 44: 129); Also see *Das eyn Christliche* WA 11:408-416 (LW 39:305-314), and an unpublished paper by Cameron Mackenzie, “The ‘Early’ Luther on Priesthood of all Believers, Office of Ministry, and Ordination.”
Vocatio ("Calling") and Ordinatio ("Ordination") Are Not Synonymous

Vocatio refers to the particular calling to a particular congregation. Ordinatio is an actualizing of the choice and calling to ministerial office in general. Ordination confirms the legitimacy of the call. It is impossible in Luther’s eyes to have a “vocation” without “ordination” and vice versa. Ordination is not enough, one must have a call to a particular congregation. Because of the nature of ordinatio, it is nonrepeatable. Vocatio, however, can be repeated if a pastor is called to a different parish. One of the major tasks of the early Reformers was the creation (or re-creation) of the rite of ordination. Above in the section Phase One I detailed Luther’s early understanding of ordination. Luther rejects ordination as a sacrament or sign of God’s promise. Consequently, the individual who is ordained does not have a character indelebilis. Despite his rejection of ordination as a sacrament, Luther does affirm the importance of ordination as a communal assignment of the public office. Ordination is a mark of the church.

168 Lieberg, Amt und Ordination, 182.

169 Martin Luther, Das Eyn Christliche versamlung odder gemeyne recht und macht habe, alle lere tzu urteylen und lerer zu beruffen, eyn und abzusetzen, Grund und ursach aus der schrifft, WA 11:408–16 (LW 39:305–14).

170 The first ordination was held in 1525 at the Castle Church in Wittenberg, presided over by George Rörer.

The Scope of the Office of Ministry: Ambiguities in Language

Before moving on it is necessary to acknowledge that though Luther stays consistent with the responsibilities of the office of ministry, he does not remain consistent in his vocabulary surrounding it. Though he uses several phrases interchangeably to describe the office of ministry,¹⁷² two appear most often—“preaching office” (Predigtamt) and “teaching office” (Lehramt). The simple question is this—does Luther equate the office of ministry with either Predigtamt or Lehramt?

Sometimes Luther does not limit the preaching office to public preaching. He often includes administration of the sacraments and absolution as other forms of proclamation.¹⁷³ Perhaps it includes some forms of spiritual counsel or Bible study that take place outside of absolution as well.¹⁷⁴ From this perspective, the office of preaching is larger than the public ministry. Luther provides us with at least two examples of those who are not occupying the office of ministry and are allowed to preach publicly. In his lectures on 1 Timothy, commenting on the qualifications of deacons in 3:8, he points out that deacons preached occasionally. Their principal duties were to care for the poor and the widows.”¹⁷⁵ The preaching and the fulfilling of other duties are the point here.

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¹⁷² Others include “ministry of the word” (ministerium verbi), “pastor,” (pfarrer),and “pastor (caregiver)” (seelsorger).

¹⁷³ This is also seen in the Augsburg Confession, BeKS 98 (BoC 75).

¹⁷⁴ WA 32:303 (LW 21:8).

Luther provides a second example in that of his close friend and colleague Philipp Melanchthon. In a 1521 letter to Spalatin, Luther himself points out that Melanchthon is not “anointed or tonsured, but married,” to emphasize how officially unqualified he is. According to Luther, this does not matter, as he is a priest and does the work of a priest as he teaches the Word of God. Later in a separate letter from the same year to Nicholas von Amsdorf, Luther again points to Melanchthon:

I have written to Spalatin that he should push the idea of our Philip lecturing to the people in German on the Gospels; Philip should do it on festival days and in some place like a lecture hall. Thus it would gradually come about that the Gospel would be preached in the old manner. You have a fitting answer if someone wants to object that a layman should not preach the Gospel in a corner; answer that [Melanchthon] is doing it under the auspices of the University, and ex officio. Luther clearly allows for occasions where someone who is not called or ordained to the office of public ministry may actually teach or preach publicly. Presumably this would happen with a call or special request of the church or public official, as in this case of Melanchthon.

At other times, however, Luther equates the office of ministry and the German word Predigtamt. An excellent example of this is Luther’s lecture on 1 Timothy 3 (1528). This is a well-known passage that gives details for the qualifications of a pastor or one who will fill the office of ministry. Interestingly, though, Luther never uses this word.

176 Luther to Spalatan, October 9, 1521, WA Br 2:388, no. 94 (LW 48:308).
177 Ibid.
178 Luther to Elector Frederick, March 5, 1522, WA Br 2:390, no. 117 (LW 48:311). “Scripsi Spalatino, ut aget de Philippo nostro, si forte vernacula euangelium vulgo in aliquo loco, ut collegio, festis diebus recitaret, qua arte paulatim in praedicandi veterem ritum apud vos euangelium veniret. Habetis pulchrum obiectum, si quis volet inhibere laico euangelium dicendum in angulo, scilicet quod in loco studii et ex officio hoc faciat.”
The commentary is in Latin, so his wording is obviously different. The wording he does use is “preacher” and “teaching office.” Another example comes from his lectures on Zechariah (1526). Reading the prophet Christocentrically, Luther points out how Christ performed his teaching office, which his Father had demanded of him. If the office of ministry comes from and is modeled after Christ, then here we have, by way of Christ, an equation of the teaching office and the office of ministry.

Ministry and the Necessity of Education

One last priority for Luther for the office of ministry needs to be mentioned here, that of education. In 1530, Luther wrote (and subsequently published) a sermon titled Eine Predigt, dass man Kinder zur Schulen halten solle (A Sermon on Keeping Children in School). As noted above, education was not always a high priority, nor was it a possibility, for many people in the early sixteenth century, for many reasons. Nevertheless, Luther believed education to be supremely important. In fact, this was the second time he had written on the subject. The first was written in 1524, An die Radherrn aller Stedte deutsches lands: dass sie Christliche schulen auffrichten und halten sollen (To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian

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181 Martin Luther, Introduction to “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School” (1530), LW 46:209.
Luther emphasizes the importance of building and supporting public schools. In his sermon of 1530, he addresses how already-existing schools should be used. Among the important uses of the school, one jumps out: the training of young men for the office of ministry:

Meanwhile, where is God to get people for his spiritual office? You have someone you could give, but you refuse—as does your neighbor. The office simply goes down to destruction so far as you are concerned. But because you allow the office instituted and established by your God and so dearly won to go to ruin, because you are so horribly ungrateful as to let it be destroyed, you yourself will be cursed.

Luther’s detailed description of the responsibilities and requirements of the office of ministry elucidates the importance of the ministry for the church. The description of the office also delineates a clear line between the conditions for the office of ministry and the universal priesthood. The challenge is that the delineation is not as pronounced as Luther presents. Luther begins to allow the work of the office of ministry to be done by the universal priesthood—that starts with cases of emergency. These cases of emergency will be examined in the next section.

The Universal Priesthood, Office of Ministry, and “Emergency” Exercise of the Office.

Luther is consistent throughout his writings that the office of ministry is for the public and official practice of ministry. The universal priesthood is to exercise its priestly


responsibilities in private or nonofficial ways. That being said, there are many times that Luther allows for laypeople to perform the public or official functions of the office of ministry. These allowances are usually in situations that Luther deems an “emergency” (Not in German): “For it is one thing to exercise a right publicly; another to use it in time of emergency. Publicly one may not exercise a right without consent of the whole body or of the church. In time of emergency each may use it as he deems best.”¹⁸⁴ Given the sharp distinction that Luther makes, an investigation into these emergencies and their nature will help shed some light on the nature of both the office and the universal priesthood.

Luther’s concept of an emergency situation comes up throughout his writings. For convenience they can be summed up into four general categories.

When Pastors Have Abandoned Their Office through Misuse

The main responsibility of the office of ministry is the proclamation of the Word. When a pastor is not fulfilling this responsibility, this signifies that he has abandoned the office. When this occurs, a layperson, as a result of his status as a member of the universal priesthood, may step in and fill the office,¹⁸⁵ presumably until a priest can be properly called.¹⁸⁶ Luther does not indicate in this 1523 commentary whether women

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¹⁸⁵ Luther, (Erste) Epistel S. Petri, WA 14:23 (LW 30:132).

¹⁸⁶ Althaus, Theology, 315.
could exercise their right as laypeople. He does affirm their ability to do this exact thing in the same year in *De Instituendis*. I see no reason to think this rule about women would not apply here too.

When a Pastor is Unavailable because the Congregation Has Been Refused One by the Established Authorities

The Reformation spread more quickly at the popular level than at the political level. As areas applied Reformation practices to their religious life, one of the obvious needs was for ordained pastors that guaranteed and protected the new theology and ideals gained through the reading and applying of Scripture. However, Roman Catholic bishops and priests were still installed in many places. Obviously Rome had no interest in removing them. The princes, even if they wanted to remove them, found it ecclesiastically complex and often politically untenable. So Evangelical churches were often left with no way to procure a pastor. In this case of emergency Luther and Melanchthon allowed churches to ordain pastors for themselves. Melanchthon lays out the imperative for this practice in his 1537 writing, *The Power and Primacy of the Pope*, later incorporated in the Book of Concord, emphasizing that the call must come from the church and outsiders may not force themselves on a congregation.


188 *BekS* 471–500 (*BoC*, 323-3–45).
When a Pastor Cannot Be Obtained because There Are No Candidates Available.

In some situations, a qualified candidate with the ordinary qualifications simply cannot be found. In this case, the congregation should pick one (or more) individuals, who, “in the name of all with these rights, shall perform these functions publicly.”\textsuperscript{189}

Luther’s main concern here is that things be done in an orderly fashion.

When a Pastor Is Unavailable in Special Circumstances

Three other documented “unique” circumstances appear in Luther and Melanchthon’s writings in which those in the universal priesthood are allowed to exercise the public ministry of the church. The first of these exceptions when a pastor was absent was when Christians were in genuine missionary territory.\textsuperscript{190} Given the paucity of information, one could imagine perhaps soldiers fighting in Muslim lands without a pastor present. One soldier could act as a priest for the other or vice versa. Second, when a pastor is unable to hear an individual or is absent. Luther does not indicate if it is an abandonment of office or an empty office because someone has not been called yet. He insists that priestly authority is the common property of all and individuals can lay hold of it and use it when there is no one in the office. They must stop once the office is filled.\textsuperscript{191} The third special circumstance comes from Melanchthon and his publication

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\textsuperscript{189} Luther, \textit{De Instituendis}, WA 12:189 (LW 40:34). “Et nomine omnium, qui idem iuris habent, exequantur officia ista publice.”
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\textsuperscript{190} Althaus, 315. It should be noted that Althaus counts this as an exception, but his WA/LW reference doesn’t provide information.
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\textsuperscript{191} WA 12:180 (LW 40:34).
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Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope. Melanchthon relays a story from Augustine of two Christians in a boat. One of the men baptized the other and subsequently absolved them. The point was that the keys of absolution were given to the whole church; an individual becomes the pastor or minister in the absence of an appointed one.\textsuperscript{192} A more complete treatment of this issue will be presented below in the section on Melanchthon.

A couple of important points must be drawn from the above examples. First, the major concern in these instances is not the right of laypeople to exercise their responsibilities publicly, but their responsibilities. The concern here is the filling of the office so that the Word of God can continue to be preached. Without these emergency cases, laypeople would have no right to exercise the public office. Second, the instances are a mixture of both urgency (i.e., a task needs to be done in a timely fashion—absolution at time of death or baptism) and circumstance (i.e., not necessarily urgent, but it needs to be done—preaching of the Word). Despite the circumstances, the emphasis is on the need for the office and its public responsibilities. How it is to be filled may vary, but there was never any question that the office needed to be filled.

Two particular ways of filling the office that Luther allows crystallize this point. First is Luther’s willingness to allow women to exercise the usually public functions of the office. He mentions baptism in particular. Luther argues that consecration is no match and does not compare to the power of baptizing and the proclamation of the Word: “A

\textsuperscript{192} BekS 470 (BoC 341).
woman can baptize and administer the Word of life.”¹⁹³ When women baptize, they legitimately exercise the function of the priesthood.¹⁹⁴ Luther is not advocating here that women (or any other layperson) start running around and baptizing. The point is that membership in the universal priesthood is qualification enough to exercise the sacraments. That caveat understood, what is clear here is that Luther’s greatest concern is the office and the exercise of its responsibilities, not how it gets filled.

Second is Luther’s willingness to appoint princes and electors as Notbischöfs or emergency bishops.¹⁹⁵ Religiously, electors can act as overseers of a territorial church. In particular, they can appoint pastors, provide financial resources, and make sure that the Word is being taught correctly.¹⁹⁶ Politically, they can protect the church from attacks from both neighboring Catholic territories and Catholic remnants inside the territory. The Diet of Speyer brought with it the practice of cuius regio, eius religio—“whose realm, his religion.” Each territory’s religion, in other words, was determined by the religion of the ruler. If a ruler was Catholic, then his territory was Catholic, and so on. Once a ruler was evangelical, Luther could call on him to exercise his divine responsibility to protect the

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¹⁹⁵ There is not space here to go into either Luther’s theology of government or his ecclesiology. Suffice it to say that Luther believed that the civil magistrates had a divine mandate to both protect and promote the preaching of the Word of God. An excellent overview of Luther’s position can be found in Lewis Spitz, “Luther’s Ecclesioloogy and His Concept of the Prince as Notbischof,” *Church History* 22 (1953): 19. For more information see Lewis Spitz, “Luther’s Ecclesioloogy and his Concept of Prince as Notbischofs,” 2 (1953): 113-141 and Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther und das Bischofamt* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1990), or James Schaaf, *Der Landesherr als Notbischöf* (Stuttgard: Calvert Verlag, 1990).

¹⁹⁶ Luther’s insistence on magistrates as bishops reaches a high point after the 1527–1528 visitations in Saxony. Luther found the church to be in disrepair because of lack of oversight.
expansion of the Word though political means. A great example of this can be seen in the peasants’ revolt of 1525. Luther reminds the “prince and lord . . . he is God’s minister and servant of his wrath and the sword has been given to him to use against such people.”

His concern is that the peasants are both misusing God’s Word for their own benefit as well as stopping the preaching of the Word through their violence.

Luther’s use of rulers as emergency bishops is an interesting case, but importantly, one does not find here anything that Luther has not said or emphasized before. His concern is the public versus the private exercise of the ministry, not the explication of the responsibilities of the universal priesthood, and should therefore be read in the same light as much of Luther’s writing from the fourth phase of his development.

Emergency situations present the first opportunity that lay Christians have to engage in tasks that are strictly the responsibility of the office of ministry. These occasions open the door to the opportunity of serving in different capacities, especially in the exercising of the keys as we will see in chapter four. These situations also bring up the question of the nature of both the office and the universal priesthood: which came first, which draws its authority from which, and so on. The next section of the study addresses these questions.

Scholarly Debate: Universal Priesthood and the Office of Ministry

Responding to the German debate outlined above, Brian Gerrish addresses the relationship between the office of ministry and the universal priesthood in his article “Priesthood and Ministry in the Theology of Luther.” Gerrish finds both the institution and transferral theories in Luther. He sees a certain tension in Luther between the two theories and wants to maintain it. While the office is established through Christ, the church as the universal priesthood serves a central role. First, the church is the mediator for the call to the office of ministry. As we have seen above, there is no vocatio without ordinatio; the two go hand in hand. Second, the church is the context for the Amtsträger (“officeholder”). The task both of the officeholder and of the universal priesthood is the preaching and preservation of the Word. Where the Word is (the church), so the office is. This “partnership” or coordination does not mean the officeholder is controlled by the church or that the church is the officeholder’s Herr or Lord. What it means is that God works through both the special and general priesthood.

Two treatises from 1523 show Luther’s development of the transferral theory. The first is Das eine christliche Versammlung oder Gemeine Recht oder Macht habe, alle


199 Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination*, 143.

200 Ibid., 129.
Lehre zu urteilen, etc (That a Christian Assembly or Congregation has the Right and Power to Judge all Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture). As we saw earlier in this chapter, Luther wrote the treatise to give counsel to a congregation at Leisnig. The congregation presented Luther with a written request to provide a biblical rationale for the calling of their own pastor. Luther reminds the Leisnig congregation that through baptism they have become God’s people and through Christ consecrated as priests. Referring to John 10, Luther concludes that lay members of the congregation have the right, ability, and responsibility (duty) to judge doctrine; this includes the ability to call their own pastor.

Another publication from 1523, De Instituendis Ministris Ecclesiae (On the Ministry), sheds further light. Not only are Christians priests, but they all are ministers of the Word. As Green points out, this would eliminate the need for a separate office of ministry. Luther explains, “The ministry of the Word is the chief office of the Church,

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201 Martin Luther, Das eine christliche Versammlung oder Gemeine Recht oder Macht habe, alle Lehre zu urteilen (1523), WA 11:408–16 (LW 39:301–14).
204 WA 11:414 (LW 39:312). John 10:27: “My sheep known my voice.” Vs. 5—“[My sheep] will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.”
given to all who are Christians, individually and collectively, not by mere human law, but by divine command.”

Gerrish emphasizes that the proclamation of the Word of God is the most urgent task of the church for Luther, regardless of authority “from above” or “from below.” This means that any form or function of the church must have this at the forefront and serve it primarily, if not exclusively. Gerrish also rightly points out that proclamation of the Word can come in different forms for Luther (as was laid out above)—including the sacraments, the keys, and so on. Gerrish believes, however, that though Luther promoted and saw the importance of the general priesthood, he robbed it of any real ability to proclaim the Word effectively. The main example he employs is the possession and use of the keys (absolution). Luther, according to Gerrish, did what he saw the Roman Church doing—bifurcating the possession and use of the keys, so that all possess them, but their use is limited to the office of ministry (for Luther) or the pope (for Rome).

Nonetheless, Gerrish sees Luther affirming the importance and power of the priesthood in other areas. He articulates the relationship thus: “What Luther really wanted was a process of calling in which both people and superiors had their place.” Gerrish believes that Luther’s writings support both institutional and transferral establishment.

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207 It should be noted here that Gerrish does not contextualize this relative to the public vs. private dichotomy between the special and general priesthood in Luther. It may be operating in the background for him, but he does not mention it.

208 I challenge this bifurcation in chapter four.

209 Ibid., 418.
Luther’s insistence on the right of the general priesthood to exercise the public office in emergency only seals the tension: “What his advice in emergency shows is that this hope could not have been founded on a view of the episcopate as the exclusive transmitter of the apostolic ministry.”

A year after Gerrish’s article, in 1966, Lowell Green addressed the same subject in his essay “Changes in Luther’s Doctrine of Ministry.” Green approaches the problem from a different direction. Instead of asking the question of where the special ministry derives from, Green asks whether the special priesthood is even of the same character as the general priesthood. He believes that Gerrish reached his conclusion based on a limited research window of 1520–1525. Green expands his study to writings after 1525 as well as the extremely important Quasimodogeniti sermons that appear throughout Luther’s career. Essentially, Green finds that in 1523 Luther emphasizes that Christians are not only priests but also ministers. By 1528, however, one sees a definitive separation of the special and general priesthoods: “Here then we find a careful separation of the priesthood of believers and the office of the minister. The call and charge constitute something additional to the universal priesthood, which alone give the authorization to rule as spiritual leaders, that is, to administer Word and sacrament. The priesthood has not been abolished, but the ministerial office has been found to be

210 Ibid.

something different than the priestly office.”212 Prior to 1528, Green believes that Luther did not espouse clericalism, but after 1528, there is in Luther what Green refers to as *geistliches Regiment*, “spiritual rule.” This spiritual rule, according to Green, is comparable to, but over and against, the *weltliches Regiment*, or “civil rule.”213 Green believes that this new rule finds its classic expression in article 4 of Luther’s *Large Catechism*, where he teaches submission to both spiritual and civil authorities:

Thus we have three kinds of fathers presented in this commandment: fathers by blood, fathers of a household, and fathers of the nation. Besides these, there are also spiritual fathers—not like those in the papacy who applied this title to themselves but performed no fatherly office. For the name spiritual father belongs only to those who govern and guide us by the Word of God. . . . Yet there is need to impress upon the common people that they who would bear the name of Christians owe it to God to show “double honor” to those who watch over their souls and to treat them well and make provision for them.214

Green believes that, for Luther by 1535, this separation is not just one of *Amt* (“office”) but one of *Stand* (“estate”). Green has moved beyond discussion of the origin of the special office to posit the complete separation of the priesthods.

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212 Ibid., 181.

213 Ibid., 180.

214 *BekS* 601 (BoC 408). “Ita triplices in hoc praecepto patres nobis praestitutos esse videmus, primum quidem sanguinis, deinde praesidentes in aedibus, ultimo, quibus partes gubernandae reipublicae commendatae sunt. Praeter hos supersunt adhuc patres spirituales non illi quidem, qui hactenus in paptu hoc nominis sibi falso arrogarunt neque tamen ullam patris officium sunt exsecuti, illi enim soli spiricum sunt exsecuti, illi enim soli spirituales patres dici merentur, qui verbo Di nos pascunt et fideliter praesunt gregi.” “Aso haven wir dreierlei Väter in deisem Gepot furgestellet: des Gebluts, in hause und im lande. Darüber sind auch noch geistlich Väter, nicht wie im Baptsttumb, die sich wohl also haben lassen nennen, aber sein väterlich Ampt geführet. Denn das hissen alein geistliche Väter, die uns durch Gottes Wort regiern und furstehen.”
Green believes that Luther “struggled with the problem of the relationship between the ministry and the universal priesthood for the rest of his life (after 1528) and was never satisfied with the final answer.” Here, however, Green is overstating his case and projecting onto Luther a discomfort that Luther himself never expresses. What he is doing is maturing his view over time under varying circumstances. Nonetheless, Green’s article is helpful for his discussion of the special priesthood as a Stand (estate), putting it in the same category as civil authority. More will be said about this in chapter 6.

Robert Fischer provided an extremely helpful corrective to both Gerrish and Green with his 1966 article “Another Look at Luther’s Doctrine of Ministry.” For Fischer, both Gerrish and Green come to the wrong conclusions. The problem is in the question—they are looking for the wrong things. Or better put, they find exactly what they are looking for.

Fischer believes that both Green and Gerrish are looking for dichotomies, bifurcations, or tensions that do not exist. Each examines his own selected texts to support his own points. To be sure, Fischer believes that Luther does “clearly distinguish between the spiritual priesthood and the ministerial office,” but this distinction is not one of nature. Fischer also does not see the same emphasis on submission to the spiritual

215 Ibid., 175.


217 Ibid., 265.
authority of the office of ministry after 1528. He points to a seminal text in the discussion of the universal priesthood for evidence against this—Luther’s 1535 exposition of Psalm 110.

The preaching office is no more than a public service which happens to be conferred upon someone by the whole congregation, all the members of which are priests. . . . After we have become Christians . . . each one, according to his calling and position, obtains the right and the power of teaching and confessing before others this Word. . . . Even though not everybody has the public office and calling, every Christian has the right to teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and rebuke his neighbor with the Word of God at every opportunity and whenever necessary. 218

In contrast to Green, Fischer makes it clear that he believes that Luther’s distinction between the priesthood and ministry is one of office and not of estate.

Fisher further argues that Gerrish also wrongly gets “caught up” in the question of “from below” or “from above” with respect to the source of the office’s authority. While Gerrish acknowledges that the transferal theory need not take the form of a resignation of powers, it certainly does mean a certain delegation of powers from the laity to the officeholder. If this were the case, Gerrish argues, the priesthood would be no more than a societal order established by human will. The problem with this argument, in Fischer’s mind, is the definition of priesthood. The priesthood is not just the laity, but the whole

church. Since the church (the universal priesthood) is established by God, all members of the church have their own duties that are divinely ordained. There is no evidence in Luther’s writings that this body should be seen as deficient or unable to do what God has called it to do and so in need of delegating certain responsibilities to the special office.

Fischer sees a similar problem in the “divine institution” theory. The theory implies or assumes that God established the office of ministry independent of the church—which is itself really the priesthood: “It implies that God instituted not a ministry of the church but by separate fiat a ministry for the church.” For Fischer, this will not do. He uses the same text that Gerrish uses to establish the “divine institution” theory Von Den Conciliis und Kirchen (On the Councils and the Church of 1539) but reads it quite differently. The key text reads as follows: “There must be bishops, pastors, or preachers, who publicly and privately give, administer, and use the aforementioned four things or holy possessions in behalf of and in the name of the church, or rather by reason of the institution of Christ” [italics added]. It is clear that the office is divinely instituted otherwise it would not be considered a “holy possession” of the church. But is this all it is? It is with regard to the italicized section above that Fischer challenges Gerrish. The phrase “or rather” does not reveal a bias toward the “divine institution theory” but simply indicates that Luther finds it important to mention the divine institution here in case someone assumes that the transferral theory is the proper one.

220 Ibid., 269.
221 Ibid.
“From above” or “from below” is thus the wrong question. The right question for Fischer is: How does God choose to work in the world? The answer for him is through both the office of ministry and the priesthood. The ordained ministry exists in the church, but the priesthood does not: the priesthood is the church. The church is a priesthood; it has an ordained ministry. Fischer warns that ordained ministry and the priesthood of the church should not be seen as “complementary vehicles for the Word” or as “independent modes for God’s work.” The authority of the office of ministry is neither independent of the divinely-instituted church nor is it derived from the church. God chooses to do his work through humans while retaining his sovereignty, “before which both the whole body of the church and its clergy must bow.”

Fischer thus offers a valuable corrective to both American and German scholarship at the time. The point he makes over against Lieberg et al., is that the fundamental question for Luther is how the Word is proclaimed and protected—all depends on that. Vilmos Vajta also puts it well when he points out that whatever discussion there is about the office of ministry, the first point needs to be that it is the “handmaiden of the Word” and is never an end unto itself. While there is a valuable and necessary distinction between the general and special priesthood (between private

222 Ibid., 270.
223 Ibid.
224 Ibid.
and public or unofficial and official), it is one of organization and not an indication of divine priority or value.

Luther’s position from 1523 through the early 1530s does change; the change is one of emphasis and not nature. His statements point to definitive proof that the office of ministry does become more and more prominent. Taking the lead from Green’s request to “be exact and clear in our thinking, and avoid constructing theories based solely on his formative writings from 1520–1525,”226 I submit that looking at the whole corpus of Luther’s writing suggests that the priesthood of all believers remains just as prominent in Luther’s thought. Luther is consistent that there are some tasks, such as the administration the Lord’s Supper, in which non-ordained individuals in the universal priesthood are not to engage. Nevertheless, Luther does allow for some of the tasks that are the responsibility of the office of ministry to be carried out by the priesthood of all believers, specifically the task of confession and absolution, the keys.227

This chapter has presented Luther’s development of the universal priesthood and office of ministry through four different phases of his life. Luther was consistent in his writing throughout his life. The office of ministry and universal priesthood exist side by side with one another. The office and the universal priesthood have the same responsibilities, differing only in practice. The office has the responsibility of the public exercising of the responsibilities; the universal priesthood is responsible for the private. This chapter has established the importance for the universal priesthood and the office of

226 Green, “Changes,” 175.

227 Martin Luther, Von Den Schlüsseln (1530), WA 30II:500 (LW 40:370).
ministry for Luther. The ability for lay Christians to exercise *publicly* the tasks of the office of ministry, even in emergencies, opens the door for opportunities beyond emergencies. This is seen in Luther’s insistence in lay use of the keys. Consider this passage from Luther’s *Lectures on Genesis* from 1542.

If you want to be absolved from your sins in this manner, go to your pastor, or to your brother and neighbor if your pastor cannot hear you; he has the command to absolve you and comfort you. Do not invent a special absolution for yourself. If you want to receive the Lord’s Supper, go to the assembly of the church and the public congregation and receive it there. Do not devise a special administration and use of the sacraments. For God does not want us to go astray in our own self-chosen works or speculations, and so He gathers us together and encloses us within the limits of the Word so that we are not tossed about by every kind of doctrine.228

The context here is certainly an exception (no pastor present), but it is certainly not one of the emergency situations listed above. In his *Lectures on Psalm 110* (1535), Luther also calls on the individual believer to take part in absolution.

But after we have become Christians through this Priest and His priestly office, incorporated in Him by Baptism through faith, then each one, according to his calling and position, obtains the right and the power of teaching and confessing before others this Word which we have obtained from Him. Even though not everybody has the public office and calling, every Christian has the right and the duty to teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and rebuke his neighbor with the Word of God at every opportunity and whenever necessary. For example, 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.

Echoing these words in 1540, “Whenever you feel depressed, you have your pastor or brother to absolve you and to speak to you in behalf of God. Thus God runs after you,” Luther does not see the ability—the responsibility—of each believer as a “special administration” or exception to the rule, like emergency administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in the situations listed above. It is, rather, a responsibility not dependent on the presence of a priest or pastor.

In the next chapter I will examine the unique and special role that declaring absolution (exercising of the keys) plays in lay Christians exercising the responsibilities of the office publicly. In numerous places, Luther reminds us that the keys are not the sole possession of the ministerial office. There are two big questions that emerge from chapter four. First, what is the nature and character of confession and absolution? If exercising the keys is the one task in which laypeople are allowed to engage, what is special about confession and absolution that allows them to do so? Second, what does


the actual practice of lay confession and absolution look like on a practical level? These
questions will be addressed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR
CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION
IN LUTHER’S THEOLOGY

Introduction

Since the very beginning of the church, some kind of ecclesiastical ritual or practice has existed that was designed to restore baptized Christians who had sinned, fallen from grace, and forfeited their right to full participation in the church with other baptized Christians.¹ The church has long believed that Christ through Peter gave it the power to “loose” and “bind” sins. Jesus tells Peter, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”² Later in Matthew, Jesus gives the authority to bind and loose sins to all of his disciples. For all the disciples, Jesus claims that their decision to bind or loose (forgive the sin or not) will also be reflected in heaven. In John’s Gospel, Jesus also reiterates this claim in his appearance to the disciples after his resurrection: “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”³ The power of the church to bind or loose sins is referred to as the “power of the keys.”

On the eve of the Reformation, the power of the keys was fundamental to the pervasive claims of the church upon Western society. In his book The Reformation of the Keys, Ron Rittgers shows the profound influence of the doctrine of the keys:

² Matt. 16:13.
It has informed the theology, worship, and mission of the Church through the centuries, and has served as the basis for ecclesiastical claims to authority in both spiritual and temporal affairs. The conviction that the church is able to forgive and retain sins . . . has also had a profound impact on Western civilization. So many defining institutions, events, and practices in the premodern West can ultimately be traced back to the belief in the keys: the papacy, the Crusades, and auricular confession, to name a few. . . . As Christian ideas about sin, guilt, and forgiveness have developed over time, they have had a tremendous influence on the religious, social, and political life of Christianity’s various host cultures.4

This chapter will explore Luther’s understanding of confession, absolution, and penance and its use in the church. I will first examine the historical development of Luther’s inheritance on penance. Following this, I will examine Luther’s developing doctrine of absolution relative to the universal priesthood and its impact on the church as well as the secular world. The discoveries here will build on the previous ones found in chapter three to show two essential facts: first, absolution played a central role in Luther’s understanding of how God gives grace in the world and second, this providing of grace through absolution was essentially the job of the universal priesthood.

The Historical Development of the Sacrament of Penance

Christianity has employed numerous forms of the sacrament of penance throughout the centuries, depending on both its needs and the social context surrounding the church. Thomas Tentler identifies three different stages of development in the doctrine: the public penance of the early church, the development of “penitentials,” and the practice of private confession.

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Early Church

The early church had no fixed penitential procedure, which is not to say that it lacked form. By the middle of the second century, the church organically developed a system of forgiveness and reconciliation for egregious sins. Tentler refers to this form as “canonical” penance as it is set by canon law. The early church took sin seriously and disciplined those who committed “gross visible violations of Christian principle,” often in public and frequently with excommunication. Tentler goes so far as to say it was “completely public.” As for private sins, they generally remained private. Consequently, worshipers were not barred from Eucharist unless the sin was made public.

Tentler points out that in these first two centuries “forgiveness of sins was less prominent than expulsion for sins.” Even where forgiveness was present, it was limited. The penitents (a third class of Christians alongside catechumens and the faithful)

performed private exercise, such as almsgiving and fasting, as well as public humiliation, and were received back into the community by a ceremony of reconciliation in which there was (again) the laying on of hands. But once reconciled, the penitent had to live with severe disabilities. The restored penitent was forbidden admission to the clergy; he could not contract marriage; if he was already married he could not enjoy his conjugal rights; he was not to engage too actively in worldly affairs; and, above all, he was not to perform military service.

5 Tentler, Sin and Confession, 4.
7 Tentler, Sin and Confession, 4.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 5
10 Ibid.
Discipline, not forgiveness, was the order of the day.

Penance at death challenged this early form of the sacrament. The combination of the harshness of the penitential acts led many Christians to put off penance until right before death: “The faithful, weak but prudent, were applying a kind of utilitarian calculation to the losses and gains of the serious decision to undertake penance. . . . Arduous penitential exercises obviously could not be required of a dying man, and his exclusion from economic, military, and marital life would be similarly irrelevant.”

Yet despite this inability to perform penitential acts, official deathbed reconciliation was still a possibility. Pope Leo I, in the fifth century, ordered that Christians on their deathbed be reconciled without the normal application of penitential exercise.

Leo’s allowance of deathbed confessions challenged the standing notion that penance was primarily for disciplinary purposes since the outcome of deathbed penance was “virtually” the same as canonical penance. This led to an even more interesting development—several churches in Gaul suggested that young Christians delay their penance until they had matured in their life and faith.

Leo allowed this important comfort to the dying and provided for their reconciliation. He emphasized, “No one is to be despaired of while he still lives in this body.” St. Augustine, however, provided a counterpoint to this, emphasizing the uncertain result of deathbed repentance. Augustine’s sermons exhort penitents to give

11 Ibid., 6.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 8.
evidence of their sorrow by actually changing their lives—the sinner must change his life while he lives, while he is healthy:

But if someone poised in the last necessity of his illness wants to receive penance, and receives it, and is immediately reconciled and dies, I confess to you that we do not deny to that man what he seeks, but we do not presume that he has made a good end. I do not presume: I do not deceive you, but do not presume. The faithful man living well leaves here sure. The man who is baptized in that hour, leaves here sure. A man who has done penance and been reconciled while he is healthy and afterwards has lived well, leaves here sure. But a man who does penance at the end and is reconciled, whether he leaves here sure, I am not sure.\textsuperscript{14}

The alternative perspectives represented by Leo and Augustine helped to inform the church’s approach to penance for the next millennium.

\textbf{Development of Penitentials}

A second form of penance emerged by the end of the sixth century as a precursor to the form of private confession that Luther inherited. This form was based on short manuals that instructed priests on the different classifications of sins, the proper penance for each, and the process for confession itself.\textsuperscript{15} It also presented some contrasts with the canonical form of penance. While canonical penance was public, this new system was private, between the priest and the individual. Since penance was privately imposed, there was no longer a formal public entrance into an order of penitents or a public system for reconciliation.\textsuperscript{16} One of the most important features of this new system, as Tentler

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 10.
points out, was that once forgiveness was given, the individual penitent was left with no “harsh disabilities” and was restored to church privately.\textsuperscript{17}

Several aspects of canonical penance, however, remained in this new form of penance. First, despite Augustine’s protests, deathbed penance remained. Second, both systems contained the four principal parts of the ecclesiastical way to forgiveness: avowal of sinfulness, expression of sorrow, restoration of penitent after long period of penance, and ecclesiastical participation. Third, they both emphasized an “inordinately rigorous schedule of penitential exercises.”\textsuperscript{18} This form of private penance continued and became the common form of confession into the Middle Ages.

\textit{Private Confession and the Fourth Lateran Council}

The third development of the sacrament of penance distinguished itself sharply from the previous two forms. It was formalized by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 (canon 21) in the decree \textit{Omnis utriusque sexus}, which made two important emphases. First, confession to a priest was \textit{required} yearly. Second, participation in the Eucharist was required at Easter (and consequently so was confession), and further, additional confession was required every time an individual wanted to participate in the Eucharist outside of Easter.\textsuperscript{19} W. David Myers sums up the importance of the decree: “The decree

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\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 11. Tentler claims that this commonality was “the most important of all” but does not explain why. Tentler uses the “Roman penitential” as a model for this form of penitential system. Translations of more penitentials be found in John Thomas McNeill and Helena Gamer, \textit{Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principle Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).
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exhibits the features of sacramental confession important to medieval religious life: discipline, pastoral care, and worthy reception of communion.”

Myers points out that one of the goals of the council was to acquaint pastors with parishioners and safeguard against heresy. Ideally, priests were now more intimately acquainted with the life of the parishioners. This fact, or at least intention, suggested that confession was not only a “liturgical and spiritual act but a disciplinary one as well, perhaps even a matter of social control.” Myers continues,

The sacrament also served as a “lower court” for discovery of acts that only authorities at the Episcopal or the papal level could forgive. Some confessors carried special privileges for absolving these “reserved” sins. The penitent fulfilling the obligation to confess might find his or her priest lacking the authority to absolve. Potentially, an individual confession might quickly cease to be either a private matter or simply a case of spiritual advice. Since it might involve public penance or restitution, which the church could enforce on its own or through the secular government, receiving the sacrament carried risks for the penitent beyond the forum of confession.

A paradox thus arose: confession was designed to be a voluntary act, but now it was imposed on the faithful as an annual obligation with severe penalties for those who did not meet that obligation.

Along with required yearly confession, Tentler points to several important developments, stemming partially from Omnis utriusque sexus, that emerged with the rise


21 Ibid., 30.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid. The penalties included refusal of burial on church grounds and denial of the Lord’s Supper, among others.
of private confession. First, penance became lighter and more arbitrary. While penitential manuals existed, the rise in confessions required more priests to hear the confessions. \(^{25}\) Out of necessity, confessors began to expand the kinds of penance offered, moving past those penances that were prescribed in the penitential manuals. \(^{26}\) Often the prescribed penance was too harsh and unrealistic, and people either stopped coming to confession, lied about their sins, or waited until death. Lighter penances needed to be applied “lest they become more harmful than medicinal.” \(^{27}\) In his twelfth-century manual *Liber Poenitentialis*, Alain de Lille suggests offerings, prayers, and pilgrimages in place of fasts and vigils that some cannot endure. \(^{28}\)

Behind the Fourth Lateran Council, one must go back to the mid-twelfth century to see the genesis of the relationship between confession and penance and its importance. As Rittgers points out, it was Anselm of Canterbury who articulated the accepted medieval understanding of penance in his discussion of the atonement. \(^{29}\) According to Anselm, God commanded Adam and Eve to honor him by freely submitting their will to his. By their rebellion and disobedience, they misappropriated the honor due God: “A person who does not render God this honor due Him, takes from God what is His and

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\(^{25}\) The introduction of the Mendicant Friars greatly increased the number of individuals hearing confessions.

\(^{26}\) “Already in the twelfth century the authority of Gratian was lent to the opinion that penance is arbitrary—that is, that they might be decided by the priest and were not dictated by a written fixed tariff.” Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 17.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.

\(^{28}\) Ibid.

\(^{29}\) Rittgers, *Reformation of the Keys*, 30.
dishonors God, and this is to commit sin. Now as long as he does not repay what he has plundered, he remains at fault.”

The fundamental problem is that humanity is incapable of repaying what it stole from God—his honor is of infinite worth according to Anselm; “Infinite indebtedness” occurred. The coming of Christ thus addressed the debt difference between what humanity owed and what it could pay. This is the main subject of *Why God Became Man*, Anselm’s seminal and classic work. Anselm contends that Christ, God incarnate, settled humanity’s debt with God by offering his perfect obedience in the stead of their disobedience. Despite Christ’s sacrifice, humanity still faces a problem, according to Anselm: Christ’s sacrifice paid for the original debt, but there remains a penalty that needs to be paid. It is not enough to render honor to one who has violated another’s honor; they must make restitution to the person whom they have dishonored. Rittgers explains, “While Anselm could accept the idea that God had forgiven humanity’s debt by an act of sheer mercy, he, along with his contemporaries, balked at the notion of God releasing them from their penalty without demanding something in return. Honor had been restored but restitution for injury still needed to be rendered.”

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34 Ibid.
This differentiation between the debt of guilt (Latin *culpa*) of sin and the penalty or punishment (Latin *poena*) for sin became the backbone of late medieval theology and directly contributed to the “logic” of penance. Based on Anselm’s articulation, most theologians on the eve of the Reformation believed that Christ’s sacrifice had atoned for original guilt and damnation, but the *formes peccati*, or tendency toward sin, remained within humanity for them to deal with. Not only did this tendency remain, but humans daily collected new debt as they gave into their tendency to sin. Penance made up the difference between the debt paid by Christ for original sin and the debt incurred for new sins.

A century after Anselm, the social context had changed. There was an emerging capitalist culture that had already developed a “bookkeeping” mentality. Instead of representing God as a feudal lord whose honor was at stake, late medieval theologians presented God as an “exacting but merciful merchant to whom they owed a sizable debt.” As Rittgers points out, business-minded urban dwellers could relate to this picture of God. Theologians deliberately encouraged the transfer of this mentality to the religious life—essentially keeping track of debits and credits relative to one’s relationship with God. The *Mirror of Confession for the Sinner*, a popular confessional manual in Nürnberg, provides the perfect example for Rittgers. It defines confession as “nothing

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36 Rittgers, *Reformation of the Keys*, 32.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.
other than reckoning with God by means of sorrow and suffering in order to pay off one’s
debt.” Economic terms such as abtilgen, abszalen, quitt machen, Schuld, absolviren, which were used in business, were also used to define humanity’s relationship with God.

The rigor or length of penitential works was not essential to the priest’s
pronouncement of forgiveness. For the first time in the history of the church, forgiveness
was not dependent purely on the work of the penitent. Instead of penitential works of
satisfaction, the theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries “accepted contrition as
the principal part of the forgiveness of sins.” The application of contrition, however,
was nothing new. The introduction of deathbed repentance evidenced that a penitent’s
internal sorrow could take the place of outward penance. The penitent was unable to
engage in penitential acts given by a priest. Therefore, the internal sorrow of the one
dying was enough. Tentler concisely states the question: if contrition became the
principal part of penance, was there a need for confession, or what role did confession
now play? More to the point, what was the role and power of the priest? In his book
Harvest of Medieval Theology, Heiko Oberman provides a helpful summary of the three
main schools of thought that emerged on the topic: the contritionist school, identified

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 33
41 Tentler, Sin and Confession, 18.
42 Ibid., 19.
43 Ibid.
44 Heiko Oberman, The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval
with Peter Lombard; the attritionist school, identified with Thomas Aquinas, and the absolutionist school, identified with Duns Scotus.\textsuperscript{45}

According to the first school, only true and “genuine contrition can delete the guilt and punishment of sin.”\textsuperscript{46} The role of the priest in this setting was simply to declare God’s forgiveness based on the contrition of the penitent. The priest did not provide forgiveness but declared the forgiveness that God gave.\textsuperscript{47} The priest’s role in the sacrament, then, was merely “declarative” in function. He merely indicated the fact that justification had already taken place.\textsuperscript{48}

The second school is represented by the likes of Aquinas and Bonaventure. This school endeavored, according to Oberman, to steer a middle course between the other two. They emphasized the importance of interior acts of contrition and also the importance of the infusion of the “first grace” that is central to the sacrament of penance.\textsuperscript{49} The \textit{ex opere operato} power of the sacrament, according to this view, transforms imperfect contrition (attrition) into sufficient contrition.\textsuperscript{50}

Duns Scotus sought to move the discussion away from questions surrounding sorrow (“perfect,” “imperfect,” or “true”) and focus on absolution. Scotus believed that

\textsuperscript{45} Rittgers uses this three-school schematic is his development of penance as well.

\textsuperscript{46} Rittgers, 47.

\textsuperscript{47} Peter Lombard’s teaching depended to a large degree on Abelard’s teaching from the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 154.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
the true essence of the sacrament was found in the pronouncement of absolution.\textsuperscript{51} Contrition could not be required as a “necessary disposition” for reception of sacramental grace, as that would fundamentally vacuum the power out of the sacrament. It is only the power of God that absolves, and this power is not dependent on any human work.\textsuperscript{52}

Despite these three different emphases, Rittgers points out that each school had some things in common with the other two. First, all held that God is the ultimate source of both sorrow and forgiveness, and second, they all held to the sacerdotal authority to remit the penalty for sin based on their possession of the keys.\textsuperscript{53} Despite these agreements, they disagreed on how this divine grace was mediated to the penitents. Oberman summarizes the changes relative to the position of Biel (from whom Luther inherits a great deal). Biel requires two elements for true absolution. First is the presence of a true interior act of contrition. Second, this interior act is one of genuine love for God’s sake (\textit{propter deum}). Neither Peter Lombard, Scotus, nor Aquinas was able to account for both of these needs.\textsuperscript{54}

A further nuance emerged within the context of private confession: the practice of granting indulgences. Indulgences, a medieval development connected with the application of the sacrament of penance, were essentially designed to relax the punishment or satisfaction required of a penitent applied by the confessor. Before the rise

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 148.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Rittgers, \textit{Reformation of the Keys}, 33; Tentler, \textit{Sin and Confession}, 273–77.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Tentler, \textit{Sin}, 155–56.
\end{itemize}
of private confession, the congregation granted the indulgence to a penitent sinner.  

To be reinstated to the congregation, sinners who had been excommunicated by a particular congregation were to show sorrow for their sins (*contritio cordis*), confess their sins verbally (*confessio oris*), and finally “render” penitential acts (*satisfactio operis*) that were determined by the congregation.  

Private confession and penance came to replace the public form and was integrated into the sacramental system of the church. As a part of the sacramental system, the popes began to use indulgences to enhance their power and wealth. The rise of the Crusades in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries accelerated the development and application of indulgences. While the church only initially administered indulgences to crusaders, it later began giving them to all those who were able to substitute their money (considered as alms, given in penance) for participation in the penitential system as well.

With the Crusades ending, the pope had to find another venue and income stream for indulgences. Following the new tradition of granting indulgences for the visiting of shrines in Rome, Pope Boniface VIII granted a plenary indulgence (complete remission of all temporal punishment remaining after absolution) to every penitent pilgrim who traveled to shrines in Rome during the Year of Jubilee, 1300. By the end of the fourteenth century, every person who was able to pay alms was able to obtain indulgences.

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55 Martin Luther, *Introduction to Ninety Five Theses* (1517), LW 31:19.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.
The opposition to Roman Catholic power debated how the pope could relax a penalty that God had demanded. The answer came in the thirteenth-century development of the treasury of merit. Theologians developed the idea that this treasure was a “storehouse of merits” of Christ and the saints who had done more than God had required them to do. The pope had the ability to draw on this treasury when giving indulgences. The impact of the pope to apply this treasury of merit was not limited to this life. In 1477, Pope Sixtus IV declared that the pope also held authority over souls in purgatory, but only by way of intercession for them. 59 Consequently, unable to distinguish between intercession and complete jurisdiction, laypeople began to buy indulgences for the dead. 60

Luther’s Immediate Context

On the eve of the Reformation, penance was thus alive and well. Confession was expected a minimum of once a year, and generally heard privately, usually by one’s local parish priest, with some exceptions. 61 The penances imposed were not standard; each confessor had the ability to decide on the appropriate penance. As both an individual who was required to confess as well as one that would hear confession, Luther (and the rest of late medieval penitents and confessors) naturally worked within the system that was already in place.

How the sacrament of penance was practiced on the eve of the Reformation is clearer than the actual impact of the sacrament on the everyday life of the penitent during that

59 Harvest, 405.
60 Karant-Nunn, 177.
61 The rise of Mendicat Order provided an alternative to the parish priest, see Tentler, 17.
time. Historians often differ as to the rigorousness of penance as well as the comfort that it provided. The fundamental question is this: did the sacrament of penance provide comfort, or did the sacrament create an environment that was “heavy with anxiety, a longing deeply felt for the divine or at least for religious security which the medieval church could not satisfy?”

Steven Ozment argues that it created a culture of anxiety, describing the common experience of both monastics and laity as “a common experience of unresolved religious oppression”.

“What the Reformation did have in common with the late medieval reform movement was the conviction that traditional church authority and piety no longer served the religious needs of large numbers of people and had become psychologically and financially oppressive. Luther’s inability to satisfy his own religious anguish by becoming a self-described “monk’s monk” was an experience many laity also knew in their own way, for they too had sought in vain consolation from a piety based on the penitential practices of monks.”

Lawrence Duggan represents the opposite pole. Pointing out some of the gaping loopholes in the penitential system that allowed the penitents to exercise a large amount of control over who heard their confession as well as how the confession was performed, he sees no reason to find the culture of fear that Ozment describes:

Strictly speaking, little evidence exists to support the assertion that late medieval penitential practice induced widespread anxiety. The windows into men’s souls
which historians so ardently desire are few indeed and usually opaque at best. The case rests largely on completely unwarranted generalization from the well-known troubles of Luther and a few of his associates and contemporaries.  

As Duggan points out, while most historians agree on the existence of “angst,” there is not agreement on the causes or nature of the fear. It is in this contested setting that Luther’s theology and doctrine of the universal priesthood emerged.

Ron Rittgers dedicates a complete chapter to the “medieval mentality” surrounding absolution. While his account is specific to Nürnberg, it is informative, and he makes some important observations. First, canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council details that an “ideal confessor was a gentle yet thorough doctor who took great care to apply the appropriate remedy to his wounded patient.” Though it is harsh at times, even the *Mirror of Confession* suggests that the priest should be humane and have empathy. Rittgers finds a practical application of this emphasis in the sermons of Stephen Fridolin of Nürnberg. Quoting from a homily of Fridolin’s, Rittgers points out how harshness was combined with compassion: “(Be truthful in your confession), not so that you may be judged a sinner, but so that you may be justified; not so you may (be) imprisoned, but rather set free; not so that you may be condemned to death, but so that the gates of heaven may be opened to you and the gates of hell closed.”

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67 Ibid., 155.

68 Ibid.

69 Rittgers, *Reformation of the Keys*, 35.

70 Ibid., 36.

71 Ibid.
This trend in leniency, however, according to Rittgers, was matched with equal harshness. That being said, the picture Rittger paints of Nürnberg is close to that of both Ozment and Duggan: “The relative aggregate picture that emerges from the extant Nürnberg sources suggests that a model confessant was one who heeded the advice of the *Mirror of Confession*: she endeavored to live contently between the hope of forgiveness and the fear of damnation.” Most likely, there were times that the confessant experienced both compassion and fear. This combined with the popular penitential literature and practices confirm to the “laity and clergy alike the necessity of living between hope and fear.” Last, Rittgers points out that it would be “a few years” after *Mirror* was published before individuals would begin to hear sermons and read pamphlets that suggested that they could be certain of forgiveness and that they no longer needed to live in fear.

The debate surrounding the medieval mentality toward penance is an intricate one. Nevertheless, all the authors mentioned here are right about one thing: there is no doubt that anxiety existed relative to penance in the Middle Ages. Unfortunately, this is where certainty ends. Two things are still fundamentally unclear. The first is the source of the anxiety. Ozment’s claim that the constant sense of insecurity relative to forgiveness led to anxiety is plausible, but may not provide the whole picture. As Ozment points out, life was tenuous in all areas, not just in this one. The ability to determine what proportion of anxiety came from penance is therefore difficult to gauge. A discussion of anxiety in

72 Ibid., 45.
73 Ibid., 46.
74 Ibid.
the life of a late medieval Christian is a different discussion from the discussion of anxiety caused by penance. Most of the evidence presented by the like of Duggans, Ozment, and Rittgers gives the reader an informed view of the priestly perspective (what they were instructed to teach and do), what the laypeople were hearing and reading (sermons, tracts, etc.), and even how laypeople react in the religious realm (purchasing indulgences, etc.).

This historiographical and psychological introduction to late medieval penance was helpful to set up Luther’s world. Now I turn to Luther himself to see Luther’s developing doctrine. I will cover a wide range of topics: penance, contrition, confession, and the relationship of confession to clergy. The text will continue to show the relationship between absolution and the universal priesthood.

Luther on Penance

Luther did not create his understanding of penance ex nihilo; rather, he worked against the background of the late medieval schools of thought regarding penance described above. Despite Luther’s attack on Biel, he inherits a great deal from him. Oberman summarizes Biel’s contributions in regard to true absolution as two-fold. First is the presence of a true interior act of contrition (which for Luther only comes through the Word and the Holy Spirit). Second, this interior act is one of genuine love for God’s sake (propter deum – again for Luther this comes from the Word and the Holy Spirit). Neither Peter Lombard, Scotus, nor Aquinas was able to account for both of these needs.75 While Luther benefitted from Biel’s work, the center of Luther’s theology was

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75 Tentler, Sin, 155–56.
the Word. Absolution is effective because it produces contrition and love. Only then is it effective in conveying forgiveness.

The traditional number of sacraments in Luther’s day, defined as dogma at the Council of Florence in 1439, was seven: baptism, confirmation, marriage, extreme unction, the Mass, penance (confession), and holy orders. As with much that he inherited, Luther questioned the biblical basis of this enumeration. Luther’s emphasis on God’s promise in his Word led him to eliminate many of these traditional rites as sacraments in the strict sense. At one point in the Babylonian Captivity, Luther narrows down the number of sacraments to three (baptism, Lord’s Supper, penance), only then to narrow the number down to two (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) a few pages later.76 Penance misses the final cut, as it does not contain an external sign.77 Both baptism and the Lord’s Supper carry with them Christ’s promise and an external sign; for baptism, water, and for Lord’s Supper, bread and wine. The promise of the sacrament, however, is not found in the sacrament itself but in the words of Christ that accompany the sacrament. Luther, therefore, does not necessarily reject the other practices out of hand, penance in particular. Without the sign and promise, they are of human construction and thus cannot be considered essential—helpful perhaps, but not essential. But penance—or absolution—though lacking a prescribed external sign, does have Christ’s promise.

For Luther, the effectual nature of baptism or Lord’s Supper is not a result of the character of the external sign (water, bread, or wine), of the person administering the sacrament, or the act of receiving the sacrament. Rather, the effectual nature of these sacraments is rooted in the promise of God in his Word. This promise is not contained in the sacrament itself but is found in the words of Christ that accompany the sacrament. This promise is efficacious in delivering forgiveness, grace, and salvation.

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76 Martin Luther, De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae (1520), WA 6:572 (LW 36:124).

77 Luther is indebted to Augustine for his understanding of the correlation of sacraments and external promises. See John M. Rist, Augustine (Cambridge: 1994), 23-40, 247.
baptism, or of the person getting baptized—it comes from God’s Word in the promise. In the *Large Catechism*, Luther instructs, “(Baptism is) water comprehended in God’s Word and commandment and sanctified by them. It is nothing else than divine water, not that water itself is nobler than any other water but God’s Word and commandment are added to it.”78 The water itself is an “external mask,” or *larva*, in which God’s Word is enclosed.79

Luther’s thought on baptism is closely paralleled in his understanding of confession and absolution. As mentioned above, penance carries a direct command and promise from Christ; what it does not have, however, is an external sign. Despite that lack, for Luther, forgiveness of sin is not dependent on either the perfect contrition of the penitent or the character of the confessor. The Word of God guarantees the promise of absolution. The confessor and the words of confession are just an “external mask,” as is the water in baptism—*larva*. The word of forgiveness that is delivered by the confessor is not his word, but God’s Word. He stands in God’s stead to deliver the promised word of forgiveness.

Confession required a confessor, and prior to the Reformation the confessor was generally a priest. Yet Luther did not believe that the priest possessed a *character indelebilis*—the clergy were not, in other words, endowed with any greater spiritual power than any other baptized believer. Therefore, much like the contritionist school,

78 *BekS* 693 (*BoC* 468). “Ex his jam memorais sanum intellectum percipe atque interrogaus, quid baptismus sit, ita respnde onon esses prorsus aquam simplicem, sed eusmodi, quae verbo et pracepto.” “Aus diesem lerne nu ein richteigen verstand fassen und antworten auf die frage, was di Taufe sei, nämlich also, das fie nicht ein blos schlecht Wasser ist, sondern ein Wasser in Gotes Wort und Gepot gefasset und dadurch gehilght.”

79 Ibid.
Luther did not believe that the priest provided forgiveness *per se*. The priest *conveyed* the forgiveness of God to the penitent. In an appendix to the section on baptism in the *Kleiner Katechismus*, Luther deals with confession. Here he provides the words that the confessor is to say: ‘“God be gracious to you and strengthen your faith. Amen.’ Let the confessor say further:

Do you also believe that my forgiveness is God’s forgiveness?’ [Answer]: ‘Yes, dear sir.’ Thereupon he may say: ‘Let it be done for you according to your faith. And I by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ forgive you your sin in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in peace.’

The words of absolution, then, are not the priest’s words, spoken by personal charism or authority, but the objectively true Word of God. Much like Moses, the confessor only speaks the words of God to the people. He should be believed no less than the voice of God. As Luther explored the implications of this theology, he affirmed the conclusion that any Christian can hear confession, even laypersons—especially laypersons.

With the Word fully established at the center of Luther’s theology of confession, what role do things like confession, contrition, and penance play? Does Luther “fit” within one of the schools detailed above, or does he go in a new direction?

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Luther on Contrition

At the outset, Luther was strongly influenced by the contritionist teaching of Lombard. Indeed, much of his early writing is directed at the abuses that come from fundamental misunderstandings of contrition, its meaning, and how it is accomplished. One thing that Luther shared with other late medieval preachers was the pastoral concerns that came from the abuses of indulgences and their subsequent effect on contrition. Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses (1517) was his first (public) critique of the abuses. Three theses deal specifically with the issue of contrition, 35, 39 and 40.

35. Those who teach that contrition is not necessary on the part of those who intend to buy souls out of purgatory or to buy confessional privileges preach unchristian doctrine.

39. It is very difficult, even for the most learned theologians, at one and the same time to comment to the people the bounty of indulgences and the need of true contrition.

40. A Christian who is truly contrite seeks and loves to pay penalties for his sins; the bounty of indulgences, however, relaxes penalties and causes men to hate them—at least it furnishes occasion for hating them.

Luther explains the meaning of these theses in his August 1518 Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute (Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses). Here we get a first glimpse of Luther’s understanding of contrition: “Look at a true penitent and you will see that he seeks revenge upon himself so ardently for his offense against

82 See page 142.


84 Martin Luther, Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute (1518), WA 1:525–628 (LW 31:81–252).
God that he compels you to have mercy on him. In fact it is even necessary to dissuade
him, lest he destroy himself.”

Luther joins many other late medieval preachers in his
understanding of contrition as a heartfelt desire to make satisfaction for one’s sins. This
satisfaction comes from within them, out of their own ability, not from indulgences:
“Man does not, however, become better by the means of indulgences, but is merely freed
from all penalties” (Thesis 44).

There are two features to Luther’s understanding of contrition in the Ninety-Five
Theses. First, contrition is necessary. While not fully defined or measured, it is necessary.
Contrition is a response to the wrong that the penitent has done and the intense desire to
right that wrong. Second, contrition must be outwardly expressed as a payment of penalty
for sins. The advent of indulgences was meant to eliminate the punishments that come
with sin and naturally decrease the amount of contrition possessed by the penitent.

A transition in Luther’s thought is marked by his Sermon von dem Sacrament der
Pusz (Sacrament of Penance). Published in 1519, two years after the Theses, it became
influential as a faithful presentation of Luther’s thought on genuine repentance and
forgiveness. While not discounting the importance or need of a “heartfelt desire to

quaerere utionem offensionis divinae, ut cogat te sui misereri, immo ut necessarium sit ei resistere, ne
destruat sese”

86 Ann Thayer, Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation (Burlington, VT:
Ashgate, 2002), 149.

87 Martin Luther, Resolutions disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute (1518), WA 1:600 (LW
31:202). “Sed per venias non fit melior, sed tantummodo a poena liberior.”


89 For an excellent summary of the impact of the publication of these tracts see Mark Edwards,
satisfy one’s sins,” Luther moves his focus to the central importance of God’s Word: “It follows, then, in the first place, that the forgiveness of guilt, the heavenly indulgence, is granted to no one on account of the worthiness of his contrition over his sins, nor on account of his works of satisfaction, but only on account of his faith in the promise of God.”

The focus is a bit different here: Luther moves from praising the value of contrition to emphasizing its limits. A penitent or priest may inquire as to whether they are truly contrite, but this “true” contrition is never “sufficient” contrition. Receptivity for God’s promise consists only in faith and the desire (willingness) to receive the message.

Sin, contrition, and good works should be treated in sermons before the sacrament and confession. This is a shift from his understanding in the Theses.

Luther’s understanding of contrition continues to develop into 1520 in *De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae* (*Babylonian Captivity of the Church*): “A contrite heart is a precious thing, but it is found only where there is ardent faith in the promise and threats of God.” Contrition is important, but it is provoked and created by the Word of God through the Holy Spirit. Enumeration of sins is not necessary for a contrite heart.

What should one think of personal effort in contrition? Ann Thayer is quite right in her assessment that Luther believes that contrition is only the work of the penitent to

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90 WA 2:716 (LW 35:12). “Darauf folget zum ersten, das die vorgebung der schult und das hymlisch ablas wirt niemant geben umb der würdigkeit willen seyner rew fur die sund, noch umb der werck willen der gnugthuung, Bondern alleyn umb des glaubens willen yn die vorsprechung gottis.”

91 WA 2:720 (LW 35:18).

92 Luther, *De Captivitate*, WA 6:545 (LW 36:84). “Magna res est cor contritum, nec nisi ardentis in promissionem et comminacionem divinam fidei.”
the extent that the penitent recognizes his impotence in the face of sin before God.⁹³

Luther takes the spotlight off the individual’s efforts and places it on God’s objective promise of forgiveness.⁹⁴ Contrition is the result of faith in the promise of God’s Word:

Contrition was handled this way: Because no one could recall every sin (particularly those committed during an entire year), they resorted to the following loophole. If unknown sins were remembered later, then a person was also to be contrite for them and confess them. . . . Moreover, since no one knew how great the contrition should be in order for it to suffice before God, this consolation was offered: Whoever could not have contritio should have attritio what I might call a halfway or beginning contrition. . . . Here too (in confession) there was neither faith nor Christ, and the power of absolution was not explained to them.⁹⁵

The source and basis of contrition were territory to which Luther would return in later years. In 1539, in response to a decade-old battle known as the antinomian controversy, he published a treatise titled Wider die Antinomer (Against the Antinomians).⁹⁶ The controversy revolved around the relationship of the gospel to the

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⁹³ Thayer, Penitence, 156.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 157.

⁹⁵ BekS 324 (BoC 314–15). “Quod ad contritionem attinet, cum nemo posset omnia peccata sua in memoria retinere, præsertim per integrum annum commissa, centones hos assuebant, si memoria peccati absconditi forte recurreeret, etiam illud sufficiens contritione deflendum et confitendum esse, etc. Interea Dei gratiae homo committebatur. Cum etiam nemo sciret, quanta contrition esse deberet, quae coram Deo sufficeret, dicebant, si quis contritionem non haberet, eum saltem attritionem habere oportere, id est dimidiam quasi contritionem vel initium contritionis. Haec vocabula ipsi nec intellexerunt nec intelligerent minus quam ego. Et attritio reputabatur pro contritione venientibus ad confessionem. . . . Nulla hic fides, nullus Christus era. Et virtus absolutionis non explicabatur confitenti.” “Mit der Rue war es also geta?: weil neiemand alle seine Sunde funnte bedenten (sonderlich das gaze Jahr begengen) flichen sie den Pelz also. Wenn die verborgen Sunde hernach ins Gedächtnis Tämen, muste man sie auch bereuen und beichten, etc. Indes waren sie Gottes Gnaden befolgen. Zudem, weil auch neimand wuste, wie grss die Reue sein sollt damit sie ja gnugfam ware fur Got, gaben, sie sochen Trost. Werr nicht funnte contritionem, das ist Reue haben, der sollte attritionem habe, welch ich mag eine halbe oder anfang des Reue nennen; denn sie haben selbs alles beides nicht verstanden, wissen uach noch nicht, was es gesagt fei, so wenig als ich. Solch attritio ward denn contrition gerechent.”

law, particularly the use of each in true repentance and contrition. A full explanation of the controversy is not possible here, but a summary is necessary in any discussion of Luther’s understanding of contrition.\footnote{For an thorough treatment of the controversy, see Timothy Wengert, \textit{Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon’s Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over “Poenitentia”} (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1997).} In his \textit{Unterricht der Visitatoren an die Pfarrern ym Kurfurstenthum zu Sachsen (Visitation Articles)} of 1527, Melanchthon puts great emphasis on the need to preach both the law and the gospel: “Many now talk only about the forgiveness of sins and say little or nothing about repentance.”\footnote{Martin Luther, \textit{Unterricht der Visitatoren an die Pfarrern ym Kurfurstenthum zu Sachsen} (1527), WA 26:202 (LW 40:274). “Aber viel itzund sagen allein von vergebung der sunde und sagen nichts oder wenig von Busse.”} He believed that repentance and contrition, both instilled by the rigorous preaching of the law, are preconditions for faith.\footnote{Luther, \textit{Wider die Antinomer}, WA 50:468 (LW 47:101).} Johann Agricola, a contemporary of Melanchthon, fiercely objected. Appealing, as he believed, to earlier statements by Luther, Agricola held that contrition and repentance were not a precondition of faith, but a consequence of it. The preaching of the gospel, not the law, was what brought one to sorrow and faith alike.\footnote{WA 50: 469 (LW 47:102).}

Luther’s involvement was inevitable. He preached, wrote, and spoke out against Agricola’s heterodox position, one that he viewed as both theologically in error and as putting people in danger of moral laxity. To Luther, both the law and the gospel are necessary. The law does not supersede the gospel, but God continually uses it to bring persons to the gospel. The rebuke of the law is always needed.\footnote{WA 50: 471 (LW 47:104).}
In a passage from *Wider Die Antinomer (Against the Antinomians)* Luther develops this thought further: “One must preach in all sorts of ways—God’s threats, his promises, his punishments, his help, and say anything else—in order that we may be brought to repentance, that is, to a knowledge of sin and the law through the use of all the examples of Scripture. This is in accord with all the prophets and the apostles and St. Paul.”¹⁰² For Luther, it is impossible to split up the law and gospel—they are both the Word of God. One goes with the other. So when he says that faith in God’s Word through the Holy Spirit produces contrition and repentance, he means both law and gospel, as they are both part of God’s self-revelation. Further, it has to be understood that faith is a precondition of contrition. Luther emphasizes this again later in his 1539 sermon for the second Sunday of Lent on 1 Thessalonians 4:1–7.¹⁰³ This was Luther’s second foray into a debate with John Agricola over the role of the law and Gospel in contrition. Agricola continued to believe that contrition and repentance were a consequence of true faith and not a precondition of it. He proceeded to publish his view in sermons.¹⁰⁴ Luther, as he did in 1527, emphasized that it was more important to preach the Gospel rather than the Law. It was Christ Himself that accomplished it all, not the Law, and therefore should be emphasized.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² WA 50:472 (LW 47:112). “Sondern, man sol allerley wege predigen, als Gottes drewen, verheissen, straffe, huelffe, und was man kan, damit wir zur busse, das ist, mit allen Exempeln der Schrifft, zur erkentnis der suenden und Gesetzes gebracht werden, wie alle Propheten, Aposteln und S. Paulus.”


¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 22
Luther believed that attaining contrition is an act of God and not of man. The Word is central in contrition just as it is in all of Luther’s thought. The impact of the Word leads to the ability to have true confession.

**Luther on Confession**

This new understanding of contrition presented two problems. First, how did a penitent actually account for his or her sins? Second, what was the true definition and varieties of confession? Both of these will be looked at in this section.

As Luther came to see it, the canonical requirement placed an impossible burden upon humanity. In the *Smalcald Articles* of 1537, he analyzes the problem. In Part III, Article III, Part 20, Luther talks about the enumeration of sins in confession (as opposed to contrition), “Here, too, there was no faith nor Christ, and the power of the absolution was not explained to them. Rather, their comfort was based on the enumeration of sins and humiliation. It is not possible to recount here what torture, rascality, and idolatry such confession has produced.”

He also expounds it in Part IV, Article VIII, Section 2, However, the enumeration of sins ought to be a matter of choice for each individual: each person should be able to determine what and what not to enumeraet. As long as we are in the flesh we will not lie if we say ‘I am a poor person, full of sin’ Romans 7[23] states: ‘I see in my members another law . . . ‘

Because private absolution is derived from the office of the keys, we should not oneglect it but value it highly, jus as all the other offices of the Christian church.”

106 BekS 441 (BoC 315.20). “Nulla hic fides, nullus Christ erat. Et virtus absolutionis non explicabatur confitenti, sed consolatio ejus in enumeratione peccatorum et pudore consistebat. Nemo autem recitare potest miseras, carnificinas, fraudes et idolatrias exconfessione ista natas.”

107 BekS 453 (BoC 321.1). “Enumeratio autem peccatorum debet esse unicaque libera, quid enumerare aut non enumerare velit. Quamdiu enim in carne sumus, non mentiurum confitentes et dicentes: ‘Agnosco me miserum esse peccatorem et scatere peccatis,’ Rom. 7.: ‘Sentio aliam legem in membris meis’ etc. Et cum absolutio privata ab officio clavium oriatur, negligenda non est, sed maximi facienda, sicut et alia officia christianae ecclesiae magni facienda sunt.”
This forced enumeration of sin led not only to hypocrisy but also to a “superficial understanding of sin.” Luther did not think it was important to be able to account for all one’s sins. The attempt to do so is not in fact a true attempt to be contrite but a work of the law where God’s grace can never be realized. In his *Genesisvorlesung (Lectures on Genesis)*, Luther describes his personal experience as he tried to remember all of his sins, but was unable, so constantly lived in fear of being unacceptable to God:

I say that one should not confess all sins, be they mortal or venial. Indeed, a man should know that after he has made every effort he has still only confessed a minor part of his sins. How does this come about? Because scripture says, Psalms 19[:12], “Cleanse me from my hidden faults, O Lord!” God alone knows these hidden faults. And again, “Create in me a clean heart, O God” [Psalm 51:10]. Even this holy prophet confesses that his heart is unclean. And the entire holy church prays, “your will be done,” thus confessing that it does not do the will of God and is a sinner itself.

In *Wie man die Einfeltigen sol leren Beichten (How One Should Teach Common Folk to Shrive Themselves)* (1531), Luther applies his belief on the accounting of all sins to teaching confessors how to deal with the issue: “Especially do I confess before you that I did not faithfully rule my children, servants and wife to the glory of God . . . but if you know of no sin at all (which seems almost impossible), don’t confess any particular one, but receive forgiveness upon the general confession, which you make to the father confessor before God.” The enumeration of sins, for Luther, is thus impossible and useless.

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Despite not believing that confession was required or that it was a sacrament, Luther did believe it to be absolutely essential. Moreover, Luther believed that confession served a theological as well as a psychological service. In this first excerpt, Luther explains his thoughts in his extended section from *De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae* (*Babylonian Captivity of the Church*): “As to the current practice of private confession, I am heartily in favor of it, even though it cannot be proved from the Scriptures. It is useful, even necessary, and I would not have it abolished. Indeed, I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences.”

This emphasis on the relief of the conscience is a continuous theme for Luther from his earliest writings, perhaps having its genesis from his own experience as a monk.

Confession is not just about feeling better for Luther; it has theological weight as well. Through confession one receives the love and forgiveness of God, much in the same way that one receives the grace of God through acts like baptism and the Lord’s Supper: “Now God has provided us with various means, ways, and channels, through which to take hold of grace and the forgiveness of sin: first, Baptism and the Sacrament; also, as I have just said, prayer; also absolution; and our forgiveness throughout. Thus we are abundantly taken care of, and we can find grace and mercy everywhere.”

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111 Martin Luther, *De Captivitate*, WA 6:546 (LW 36:86). “Occulta autem confessio, quae modo celebratur, et si probari ex scriptura non possit, miro modo tamen placet et utilis, imo necessaria est, nec vellem eam non esse, immo gaudeo eam esse in Ecclesia Christi, cum sit ipsa afflictis conscientiis unicum remedium.”

112 Martin Luther, *Reihenpredigten über Matthäus 5-7* (1530/1532), WA 32:424 (LW 21:151). “Nu hat uns Gott mancherley weise, weg und stege furgestellt dadurch wir die gnade und vergebung der sünde ergreißen, Als erstlich die Tauff und Sacramento, item (wie jetzt gesagt) das gebete, item die absolutio
Sermon von dem Sacrament des leibs und bluts Christi, wider die Schwarmgeister (Sermon on the Body and Blood of Christ) deserves more attention relative to the nature of confession. This text is one of three sermons that Luther prepared for his congregation at Wittenberg in anticipation of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper on Easter of 1526. While the first two deal with the Lord’s Supper, the third deals more with the confession of sins. In part 3, Luther details three different kinds of confession.

The first that he details is a confession before God.

One, before God: for it is necessary above all that I acknowledge before God that I am a sinner, as the gospel concludes in Romans 3:23 and John 3:3: “unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” . . . Whoever refuses to confess this or will not admit that he is a sinner, but claims to have a free will so that there may be yet some good in him, blasphemes God and gives him the lie, and must be eternally damned, as is proper.114

The goal of this first type of confession is to acknowledge our sinfulness (lack of righteousness), our need of God’s grace, and the absolute righteousness of God. Only a Christian can make a proper confession, as they realize how valuable God’s grace is and how much they need it. Luther references David’s confession to God in Psalm 51,115


115 Ps. 51:4 (KJV). “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment.”
emphasizing the truth of God’s Word and the necessity of acknowledging the need for God’s grace.

The second kind of confession is not to God but to one’s neighbor, the kind of confession required if one Christian has offended another Christian.\textsuperscript{116} Referencing Matthew 5:23–25, 6:14–15, and especially James 5:16, “Confess your sins to one another,” Luther emphasizes the importance of confessing to one another; each individual should be humble enough to confess to another Christian.\textsuperscript{117}

There are two forms of public confession to one’s neighbor—confession for “general” and “particular” offenses or sins. General sin is our inability to fulfill our responsibility to our neighbor. Luther claims that we all need to confess to our neighbors, as no one serves one’s neighbor as he or she should; we do not live up to the kind of life that Christ commands.\textsuperscript{118}

All humans owe to each other more than they can ever pay or provide. Every human is obligated to every other human. When one realizes that they cannot pay what they owe, they must look for forgiveness: “Now when we look at the account to see how much we owe, we must quiver and quake and have no other recourse than to say, “I am in debt to others, but they are also in debt to me; I shall remit them, one and all, whatever they owe me, and then O Lord, I pray thee, forgive me also . . . this kind of confession, the kind which one must make openly before men, acknowledging one’s guilt.”\textsuperscript{119}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[117] WA 19:516 (LW 36:356).
\item[118] Ibid.
\item[119] WA 19:517 (LW 36:357). “Wenn wir nu das register ansehen, wie viel wir schuldig sind,
Particular offenses, or the “special kind,” are those that one commits specifically against another person. Luther points out that these are the sins that Jesus speaks of in Matthew 5:22–24: “If a particular person is offended, deceived, injured, reviled, or slandered, one should confess this too and admit that he has done wrong and ask forgiveness of his neighbor.”

The third kind of confession Luther refers to is private confession. This confession is utilized only if the first two are not. To guard against abuse of confession, this confession, Luther says, is unnecessary if one of the first two has been used. Luther points out that God is well aware of sins; there is no need to keep going on about them.

As seen above, Luther does not reject private confession out of hand. As long as someone takes advantage of the more public confessions, the more private form has value too: “Yet for the sake of those who would like to make use of it, private confession is by no means to be rejected. The reason is this: there is much that is beneficial and precious in it. Of note here is the emphasis on lay confession; I will return to this later in the essay.

For specific confession between an individual and a priest Luther provides a model of how confession should look. He gives specific examples in *Eine kurtze weise zu*.

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121 WA 19:520 (LW 36:359). “Aber doch ist sie mit nichte zuverwerffen umb der willen, die yhr gerne brauchen wollen. Ursach ist: Denn ynn der heimlichen beicht ist viel nutz und kostlichs dings. Zum ersten die Absolutio, das dich dein nehister frey spricht an Gottes stat, das gleich also viel ist, als Gott selbs spreche; das uns solt ja trostlich sein.”
beichten für die einfeltigen, dem Priester (Short Order of Confession Before the Priest for the Common Man) (1529). Here he gives two version of a common confession. Luther presents it as a dialogue between the official and the penitent.

Reverend and dear sir: I beseech you, for God’s sake, give me good counsel for the comfort of my soul.

What then do you desire?

Answer: Miserable man that I am, I confess and lament to you before God that I am a sinful and weak creature. I do not keep God’s commandments; I do not really believe in the Gospel; I do nothing good; I cannot bear ill. Especially I have committed this and that (here the penitent would enumerate the particular sins which distress them) which burden my conscience. I therefore ask that you, in God’s stead, would declare unto me my sins forgiven and comfort me with the word of God.¹²²

Luther then presents an alternative for confession exhibiting the same kinds of general but sincere confession.

I confess before God and you that I am a miserable sinner, guilty of every sin, of unbelief and blasphemy. I also feel that God’s Word is not bringing forth fruit in me. I hear it, but I do not receive it earnestly. I do not show works of my love toward my neighbor. I am full of anger, hate, and envy towards him. I am impatient, greedy, and bent on every evil. Therefore my heart and conscience are heavy, and I would gladly be freed of my sins. I ask you to strengthen my little faith and comfort my weak conscience by the divine word and promise.¹²³


Luther follows up this direction in *Wie man die Einfeltigen sot leren Beichten* (*How One Should Teach Common Folk to Shrive Themselves*), which I briefly touched on above. In response to the questions of what sins ought to be confessed, Luther replies,

*Answer:* In the presence of God we should acknowledge ourselves guilty of all manner of sins, even of those we do not ourselves perceive, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer. But in the presence of the father confessor we should confess only those sins we know and feel in our hearts.¹²⁴

Confession for Luther is not about enumeration. Confession is about mercy from God and surety of His love for us. The power in confession comes from the Word of God, not the confessor or the penitent.

**Luther on Absolution**

Having a full understanding of Luther’s doctrine of confession, we are able to move to his understanding of absolution. In this section we will examine Luther’s medieval influence, his definition of absolution, and the question of who can provide absolution.

Luther is highly influenced by Scotus’ understanding of absolution. We are reminded that Duns Scotus sought to move the discussion away from questions surrounding contrition (“perfect,” “imperfect,” or “true”) and focus instead on absolution. Scotus believed that the true essence of the sacrament was found in the pronouncement of absolution.¹²⁵ Contrition could not be required as a “necessary disposition” for reception of sacramental grace, as that would fundamentally vacuum the power out of the

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¹²⁵ Rittgers, 148.
sacrament. It is only the power of God that absolves, and this power is not dependent on any human work.126 While Luther is dependent on his medieval inheritance, he is not completely beholden to it either.

A first question that must be addressed is how Luther defines absolution. Simply put, absolution is the freeing of persons from the punishment of their sins by hearing the promise of God’s love and forgiveness. It is clear from above that confession and the assumed corresponding absolution should free persons from the guilt of their sin and help them rest in the promises of God. The medieval understanding of indulgences to gain absolution only masks the truth of God’s promise of forgiveness by nothing other than God’s grace. As said above, the Word of God guarantees absolution.127

A second question is the question of who is able to provide absolution. Luther’s rejection of a bifurcated estate allowed for laypeople to engage in tasks that were usually reserved for clergy. This included providing absolution. This began with Luther’s “tearing down” of the wall between clergy and laity in his An Den christlichen. This providing of absolution was not just absolution itself, but a part of the office of preaching. I will expand on this extensively in the section below.

Luther on Confession and the Clergy

Confession to a priest was a regular practice in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. It is true that some confession was heard by lay people;128 this was the

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126 Ibid.
127 See p. 154.
128 Karant-Nunn, 92.
exception and not the rule. Confessors were provided with guidebooks as to how to hear confession as well as how to respond to hear the sins of the penitent. Given the frequency of their printings, these guidebooks would have been widely used.

Confession to a priest was generally required before receiving the Sacrament of Christ’s body and blood. Lastly, we know that confession to a priest was required at least once a year before Easter. This was set forth in Canon 21 in 1215 by Aquinas himself.

As mentioned above, though Luther did not see confession as a sacrament, he saw great value in it. First, it provides a sense of comfort for the penitent. The words of absolution being spoken are not merely those of human beings, but of God. Second, Luther believes that private confession has a didactic value:

“Private confession serves a good purpose for the simple, childlike people. For since the common herd is indolent, continually hearing sermons and learning nothing, there is no one in the houses either to urge anyone to do it. So, even if private confession did not serve any other purpose, it is at least useful because it gives opportunity to instruct the people and hear what they believe, teach them to pray, etc., otherwise they go along like cattle.”

An example of the weight placed on the didactic value of confession is seen in Luther’s visitations in electoral Saxony and Meissen from October 1527 to January 1529. Parish life was in great need of reform along the lines of evangelical doctrine. Clergy, once loyal to the pope, now had to be trained in the application of the gospel. Laity, not engaged in active support of the church or the clergy, had to understand their role in support of both.

129 Tentler, 3-27.
130 Ibid. Especially see pp. 28-53.
131 WA 19:520 (LW 36:359). “Zum andern dienet sie fur die einfeltigen kinder. Denn weil der gemein pobel ein unvleissig ding ist, hoeret ymyrddar predigt und lernet nichts, helt auch ynn heusern niemand an, das mans treibet. Drumb wenn sie gleich nirgent zu gut were, so ist sie yhe dazu gut, das man die leute unterweiset und hoeret, wie sie glewben, beten lernen etc.; sonst gehets dahin wie das vieh.”
Luther approached Elector John of Saxony to help the clergy and churches as early as 1525, but nothing came of it until 1527. Since bishops were no longer present, Luther believed the visitations were in order.

Both the Old and the New Testaments give sufficient evidence of what a divinely wholesome thing it would be if pastors and Christian congregations might be visited by understanding and competent persons. For we read in Acts 9[:32] that St. Peter travelled about in the land of the Jews. And in Acts 15[:2] we are told that St. Paul together with Barnabas revisited all those places where they had preached. All his epistles reveal his concern for all the congregations and pastors. He writes letters, he sends his disciples, he goes himself. So the apostles, according to Acts 8[:14], when they heard how the Word had been received in Samaria, sent Peter and John there. Also we read in the Old Testament how Samuel travelled around, now to Ramah [I Sam. 7:17], now to Nob [I Sam. 21:1], now to Gilgal [I Sam. 10:8; 11:14; 13:8; 15:12] and other places, not out of delight for taking a walk but out of love and a sense of duty in his ministry and because of the want and need of the people.

Several important writings came out of the visitations. The first is Unterricht der Visitation an die Pfarhern ym Kurfurstenthum zu Sachssen (Instruction for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony). Written in 1528, Unterricht der Visitation is a

132 Martin Luther, *Introduction to Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony* (1528), LW 40:265–66. Religious reasons were not the only ones that motivated visitation. The prince believed that the cities and town in the areas should be given economic support; the visitations would help to identify the more needy areas. There were also political interests. Many people were interpreting the new “freedom” in the gospel as a liberation from all obligation to churches and governments alike, seen most poignantly in the peasant revolt of 1523–1524. The visitations were as much about social control as about religious training.


short theological primer for pastors. Luther includes instruction for how to teach prayer, the Ten Commandments, and also confession. In the section on confession, Luther again points out that “there are many reasons why we should exhort the people to confession, especially in those cases where they need counsel and wherein they are most troubled.”

Through confession, individuals learn the importance of the sacrament of the body and blood as well as how much God loves them when they confess: “Whoever, thus, does not know why he receives the sacrament is not to be admitted to it. In examination before the sacrament the people are to be exhorted to make confession, so that they may be instructed where the cases of doubt arise in conscience, and may be comforted, when the true contrition is in their hearts, as they hear the words of absolution.”

Another prominent example of the didactic value of confession occurs in Luther’s 1531 edition of the Kleiner Katechismus (Small Catechism), in which he gives a detailed description of evangelical auricular confession titled Wie man die Einfeltigen sol leren Beichten (How One Should Teach Common Folk to Shrive Themselves), which we encountered above. Luther uses the opportunity not only to teach about the proper use of confession but also other important theological concepts such as the complete sinfulness of humanity and the all-encompassing grace of God.

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135 WA 26:220 (LW 40:296). “Doch sol man die leute umb viel ursachen willen vermanen zu beichten, Sonderlich die felle, darynnen sie rats beduerffen, und die sie am meisten beschweren.”

136 Ibid.: “Wer nu solchs nicht weis, sol nicht zum Sacrament zugelassen werden, Zum brauch des Sacraments ynn solcher verhoere sollen die leute auch vermanet werden zu beichten, das sie unterricht werden, wo sie yrrige felle hetten ynn yhren gewissen, Auch das sei trost empfahen, wo rechte rewige hertzten sind, so sie die absolution hoeren.”


Luther gives a third and last reason why private confession is so important: comfort of the conscience: “Third, there is comfort in the fact that if anyone has an evil conscience, or some other desire or need, and would like advice, he may ask for advice here. Therefore we cannot despise private confession. For God’s Word is present, which comforts us and strengthens our faith, and in addition instructs us and teaches us what we lack, and gives us advice in time of need.” It is clear that Luther has both theological and sociological reasons for retaining the practice of private confession.

Luther’s visitation and church orders were the model for numerous other church orders that arose in the years following 1527/1528. Many of these cities consulted with Luther to construct their orders. The proliferation of church orders is important because church orders illuminate the organization and official practice of the newly established Lutheran churches. They are a clue to the theological priorities taught to pastors and what the pastors then communicated to their own laity. A brief study of visitation and church articles reveals that confession and absolution were indeed a priority.

Early modern German church orders are collected and edited in Emil Sehling, Die Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhundert, 14 vols. (Leipzig and Tübingen, 1902–); forms of worship are surveyed by Paul Graff, Geschichte der Auflösung der alten gottesdienstlichen Formen in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921). Each of these works reveals the priorities of evangelical churches through almost three centuries. What is interesting in looking

139 Martin Luther, Sermon von dem Sakrament, WA 19:521 (LW 36:359). “Zum dritten ist aber ein trost darynn, wer ein boste gewissen hat oder doch sonst ein anliegen oder not, wolt gerne rad haben, das er da umb rad bitt. Darumb konnen wir die beicht nicht verachten. Denn es ist da Gottes wort, das uns trostet und stercket ym glawben, Dazu unterrichtet und leret, was uns feilet, dazu auch rad gibt ynn noten.”
through centuries of church orders is that confession and absolution remain important priorities. An example of this is the Ducal Saxon *Kirchenordunge zum anfang, fur pfarherrn in Herzog Heinrichs zu Sachsen Furstenthum*, from 1539, ten years after Luther’s visitation articles. 140 Twenty-three years later in Magdeburg we again see the imprints of Luther’s doctrine of confession in their *Das Erbistum*, from 1562. Moving thirty-six years later, confession and absolution are still a priority in Torgau’s *Verordnung der Visitatoren*, from 1575. 141 Other orders in Saxony and Schwarzpurg and Stalburg evidence the same thing. 142 Private confession was retained in all of these areas.

Here we are presented with rich understandings of Luther’s thought on various topics all surrounding absolution and the universal priesthood. Luther makes it clear that the inherited practices are no longer valid as the word of God is what does all the work. Enumerations of sins or penitential acts were of no value as they took the place of the word of God. Confession and absolution were valuable because they were means of receiving God’s word and grace.

The next section will examine how the relationship between the universal priesthood and absolution actually functions. I will further distinguish Luther’s distinction between “public” and “private” to elucidate how lay Christians may participate in public absolution. One excellent way of making this clear is through Luther’s understanding of one Christian’s responsibility to another.


141 Ibid., 1:683.

142 Ibid., 121.
Confession and the Universal Priesthood

As seen above, both confession and the doctrine of the universal priesthood of the baptized are central doctrines for Luther. They are not only important to Luther as individual doctrines, but they are important to each other; indeed, providing absolution is a defining element of the universal priesthood. First, the ability to hear confession and provide absolution is not limited to an ordained priest but is extended to all baptized believers. Second, all baptized believers do not just have the ability to hear confession and provide absolution, but they also have the responsibility to hear confession and provide absolution.

In the previous chapter, I explained that the priesthood of the baptized has the same responsibility here as does the office of ministry. Yet while the responsibilities are the same, the contexts are different. On one hand, the office of ministry is the “public” and “official” ministry of the church; Luther is clear that one person is chosen to do the public ministry of the church. On the other hand, the universal priesthood represents the “private” ministry of the church. Luther instituted this distinction primarily for the sake of order. While all believers have the same responsibility as the office of ministry, they are limited to private execution of these responsibilities, that is, not in an official capacity representing the church or not to people outside of their family.

A deeper reading reveals that in practice Luther did not keep strictly to these distinctions. While some responsibilities remain the sole responsibility of the ordained ministry (public) and some are to be done by all believers (privately)—thereby creating a distinction between public and private—there is a third area that Luther allows in both private and public. This third area is confession and absolution, or the use of the keys.
Before looking at this third area more closely, let us review Luther’s distinction between public and private ministry. Countless times Luther emphasizes the importance of the office of ministry and the order that it brings to faith and community. The greatest example of this comes in his insistence that the pastor be the one to conduct baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and preach publicly.\textsuperscript{143} Luther is explicit in numerous places throughout his writings that these are strictly the purview of the office. Praying, sacrificing, and judging are responsibilities of the office but not limited to the public ministry. They are tasks that can be done privately and do not require a public face to be effective.

The last responsibility, binding and loosing of sins, is a unique task in Luther’s thought. Binding and loosing is not just a responsibility for all believers, but one that Luther allows all believers to practice publicly, unlike the sacraments and preaching. Close attention to Luther’s statements will show the progression of his thought.

In the medieval church, many believed that the pope was Christ’s representative on earth, in the line of Peter, and had sole possession of the keys, which meant that only he was able to exercise the power of the keys.\textsuperscript{144} Luther was quick to point out that this was patently false. In his 1519 treatise, *Ein Seremon von dem Sakrament der Buße* (*Sacrament of Penance*), he explains:

\begin{quote}
It is true that Luther allows for others, even women, to conduct these activities, but only in extreme circumstances. See Martin Luther, *Grunde und Ursach aller Artikel D. Martin Luthers so durch römische Bulle unrechtlich verdammt sind* (1521), WA 7:308–57 (LW 32: 51). For example, it is acceptable for midwives to perform baptism in emergency situations. See Martin Luther, *De Instituendis*, WA 12:169–95 (LW 40:3–44).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{143} Some believed that the keys were directly given to Peter and only through him to the other apostles (or bishops). Others believed that they were given first to Peter and then directly to the other apostles or bishops.
It follows that the keys or the authority of St. Peter is not an authority at all but a service; and the keys have not been given to St. Peter but to you and me. The keys are yours and mine. For St. Peter, insofar as he is a pope or a bishop, does not need them; to him they are neither necessary nor helpful. Their entire virtue lies rather in this, that they help sinners by comforting and strengthening their conscience. Thus Christ ordered that [the exercise of] authority in the church should be a rendering of service; and that by means of the keys the clergy should be serving not themselves but only us. For this reason, as one sees, the priest does no more than to speak a word, and the sacrament is already there. And this word is God’s word, even as God has promised.  

Absolution according to Luther is not about power but about comfort. As with baptism, the power is not in the speaker of the words of absolution but in the words themselves. So the “official” status of the one hearing the confession is irrelevant.

Another myth for Luther was the distinction between the possession of the keys and the use of the keys. While the pope conceded that everyone might have possession, only the pope had the right to use the keys. Luther quickly points out that this distinction is false, having no basis in Scripture.

We need pay no attention to the bogey man of these masqueraders when they distinguish between the power of the keys and the use of the keys, a distinction based not on scripture but on their own recklessness alone. . . . Christ gives both the power and the use of the keys to each Christian when he says “let him be to us as a Gentile” (Matt 18:17). For who is this “you” whom Christ refers when he says, “let him be to you”? The pope? Indeed, he refers to each and every Christian.  

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145 Luther, *Ein Sermon von dem Sacrament*, WA 2:18 (LW 35:16). “Czum funffizehenden, Folget, das die schluessell und gewaltt Sanct Peters ist nit eyn gewalt, ßündern eynn dinst, und die schlüssell nit s. Peter, ßöndern dyr und mir geben, deyn und meyn seyn die schlüssell, dan sanct Peter darff yhr nit, yn dem als er eyn Bapst odder Bischoff, Sie seyn yhm auch nit vott nach nütz, aber alle yhr thugent ist darrynne, das sie den ßündern helffen, yhre gewissen trosten und stercken. Alßo hatt Christus geordenet, das der kirchen gewalt soll seyn eyn dinsparkeit, das durch die schlüssell die geystlichen gar nichts yhn selbs, sondern alleyn unß da mit dienen sollen. Derhalben, alßo man sicht, that der priester nit mehr, dan spricht eyn wort, ßo ist das sacrament schon da, Unnd das wort ist gottis wort, allß er sich vorsprochenn hatt.”

146 Luther, *De Instituendis*, WA 12:184 (LW 40:26). “Hic nihil moremur larvarum larvas, qui hic aliu clavium ius, aliu clavium usum fingunt temeritate propria sine scripturis, Deinde more suo vitiosissime petentes principium. Nam cum probandum illis sit, suam potestatem esse aliam ab Ecclesiae communi potestate, ipsi hoc pro demonstrato arripiunt, et addunt deinde hanc suam fictam distinctionem,
At a fundamental level, the gospel is at stake here for Luther. The pope is reserving the grace of God, meant to be a comfort to all, for a price. Once again returning to Scripture, Luther argues that this distinction is false.

Staying consistent with his own logic, Luther sees no distinction between the possession and use of the keys for lay members of the church. This is much like Luther’s understanding of preaching. Public preaching is done by the office of ministry, but all baptized believers were able to preach privately. In countless places throughout his writings, Luther emphasizes that, notwithstanding the public office, Christians are called to fulfill their duties to their neighbors. Consider Auslegung des 109. (110.) Psalms (Commentary on Psalm 110) from 1535:

But after we have become Christians through this Priest and His priestly office, incorporated in Him by Baptism through faith, then each one, according to his calling and position, obtains the right and the power of teaching and confessing before others this Word which we have obtained from Him. Even though not everybody has the public office and calling, every Christian has the right and the duty to teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and rebuke his neighbor with the Word of God at every opportunity and whenever necessary. For example, 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.  

147 Martin Luther, Auslegung des Psalms (1535), WA 4:211 (LW 13:332). “So wir aber Christen worden sind durch diesen Priester und sein Priesteramt und jn der Tauffe durch den Glauben jm eingeleibt, So kriegen wir auch das recht und macht, das Wort, so wir von jm haben, zu Leren und zu bekennen fur jderman, ein jglicher nach seinem beruff und stand, Denn ob wir wol nicht alle im öffentlichem Ampt und Beruff sind, so sol und mag doch ein jglicher Christ seinen nehesten Leren, unterrichten, vermanen, troesten, straffen durch Gottes wort, wenn und wo jemand das bedarff, Als Vater
A few years earlier, while filling the pulpit for Bugenhagen, Luther began a midweek teaching series on St. Matthew. In these writings, which were published three times between 1532 and 1534, Luther once again emphasizes the responsibility of one neighbor to another: “So you see that if you look at it not on the basis of the work itself but on the basis of the word that is attached to it, you find in it a wonderful and precious treasure. Now it is no longer your work, but a divine sacrament and a great and powerful comfort that you can attain to the grace of being able to forgive your neighbor, even though you may not be able to come to the other sacraments.”

Luther is now referring to the hearing of confession and providing absolution as a “sacrament” and a “divine and precious treasure” and insisting that laypeople, without an office, engage in it.

While individuals may not have a calling to an office, they do have a calling to their neighbor. This calling is the basis for hearing confession and providing absolution to their neighbor. For Luther, it is the basis for all of one’s interaction with them. This includes not just exercising the keys but also the mandate to “rule, prescribe, teach, comfort, exhort.”

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148 Martin Luther, WA 32:425 (LW 21:151). “Sihe wenn du es also nicht nach dem werck an jm selbst, sondern nach dem wort so daran geheffet jst, an sihest, so findestu darinn ein trefflichen, kostlichen schatz, das es jtzt nicht mehr dein werck sondern ein Gottlich Sacrament jst, und mechtigen grossen trost, das du zu der gnade komest, das du deinem nehesten vergeben kanst, ob du gleich zu andern Sacramenten nicht komen kundtest.”

149 Luther, Genesisvorlesung, WA 48:631 (LW 3:117).
Confession to lay individuals is not just “allowed” in special circumstances, like baptism or the Lord’s Supper. Luther also allowed confession when one was too ashamed to confess it to a minister. Commenting in his lectures on Genesis, he says:

Or, if the matter is so unbecoming that they are ashamed to make it known before a minister, let them pour it out upon the bosom of another Christian godly man, whoever it may be, whose reliability is proven, and in his presence let them make their complaint concerning those matters which are pressing and pricking their conscience and let them seek advice, saying: “My dear brother, help my disturbed and afflicted conscience that I may not die in my sins or cut my life off with a rope or a sword. Advise me, dear brother! I am going to hang myself, drown myself, or do myself some harm and die in my sins, etc.” In this case, when he hears the Word of God concerning the remission of sins, either from a minister or from someone else, he will be encouraged and receive the consolation by which his heart, wounded by the darts of the devil, will be healed.  

The only requirement Luther makes here is that the layperson who hears the confession should have his “reliability proven.” Luther does not elaborate on this requirement or what it may look like.

As mentioned above, confession is not solely about the clearing of the conscience; there is a didactic element to it as well. An individual’s proven “reliability” relates to this didactic element. After all, Luther continually refers to confession as nothing more than proclamation and application of the gospel. Reliability, then, in this case refers to a person’s ability to rightly proclaim and apply the gospel. A general absence of this reliability, by both laypeople and priests, was one of the discoveries and missions of the

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150 WA 44:221 (LW 6:298). “Aut si res adeo indigna est, ut pudeat eam coram ministro proferre, in alterius Christiani et pii hominis, quisquis tandem fuerit, sinum effundat, cuius fides perspecta sit, apud eum conquerantur de ipsis, quaie urgent et extitulant conscientiam et quaerant consilium. O mi frater, consule turbatae et aldectae conscientiae meae, ne in peccatis meis moriar neve laqueo aut ferro vitam abrumpam. O rath lieber bruder, ich werde mich henccken, ectrhencken, oder ein leyd thun, in meinen sünden dahin sterben etc. Ibi cum audierit verbum Dei de remissione peccatorum, sive ex ministro sive ex quocunque alio, erigetur et accipiet consolationem, qua sanabitur animus sauciatus telis Diaboli.”

151 Luther, De Institutendis, WA 12:185 (LW 40:29).
pastoral visitations from 1527 to 1529. For one to be reliable, he or she would need to be able to distinguish between law and gospel and apply them correctly.

This brings up an interesting point. Luther consistently emphasizes throughout his life and ministry that the preaching of the gospel is solely reserved for those who have been called to the office of ministry; the office of ministry is responsible for public (i.e., official) preaching. Individuals within the universal priesthood are expected to proclaim the gospel through exercising the keys, admonishing, rebuking, teaching, and so on, but only in their families privately (i.e., unofficial). However, as we have seen through countless quotes in numerous sources, this proclamation of the gospel does not just include the family but neighbors and friends as well. We are forced, then, to explore a distinction that Luther himself invokes but does not explicitly define: what is the line between public and private, official versus unofficial? If the line is family, it becomes clear—one can only proclaim the gospel to them. The difficulty arises when this proclamation moves past family to include one’s neighbor. Given the fact that confession was private, we can assume that an individual was only hearing one confession at a time; so some limitation is assumed. But what about exhorting, teaching, and so on? Could the head of the household include his family and neighbors? Does the teaching have to take place on his own property? Could this include his extended family as well, assuming there is no male head of household?

An examination of unambiguously public cases of use of the keys—in public excommunication—helps to make Luther’s own working definition of private and public more clear. Despite the obvious abuses by both the Roman Church and political powers in their use of excommunication, Luther still saw an evangelical form of
excommunication, or the ban, as being fundamentally helpful and necessary. Luther’s basis for the ban comes from Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5. The benefits of excommunication are twofold. First, it helps lead people to repentance. Second, it provides an example for how to live correctly to those around, a deterrent for further bad behavior.¹⁵²

Luther believed in two kinds of excommunication—which he referred to as major and minor, recasting the distinction in medieval canon law between the major ban and the minor ban. Minor excommunication can be done by an ordinary pastor with the involvement of the local congregation. It consists of temporary exclusion from the Lord’s Supper pending repentance and betterment of life. Major excommunication is exclusion from the Lord’s Supper and from Christian society in general. This type of excommunication can only be imposed by the prince and not the church, making it a secular and not spiritual penalty.¹⁵³

This is the ban that belongs not to us [pastors alone] but to the entire Church. We must not complain so much about it and thus tolerate hatred and envy and especially murder, for that will not do at all. In Moses [Deut. 21:1–9], we read that if a corpse were found between two cities, the nearest town was to go out, wash their hands, and pray that the blood [not be laid to the charge of the people of Israel]. There must be no mockery or joking here. If I am to govern this church in the absence of its pastor, then it must be done in a way for which I can accept responsibility. You have quarreled with a neighbor, and you have taken and given offense. The ban is not a tyrant, but rather the serious punishment of the church, to sweep out impurity and to purge sin.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Martin Luther, DOMINICA INVOCAVIT a prandio (1539), WA 47:670; WA TR 4:280 (LW 58:13). “Interim sol nicht zur Tauff stehen nec sponsam ad templum fueren. Si venit et rogat veniam peccati a Deo, Cum sit manifesta caedes, ideo manifesta venia. Er bringe kundschafft vom Rat und freundschaft, tum accipiet manifestam remissionem [5. Mose 21, 1 ff.] peccati videntibus omnibus. In
For Luther, church, or minor, excommunication is necessary because the secular, or major, excommunication does not punish every single sin. So church (minor) excommunication is necessary to cover those sins that are not a concern of secular authorities. Whether the ban is major or minor, there is a proper way to institute it. In both cases, it has to be public. If it is a minor excommunication, the steps are as follows. First the offender should be “admonished” privately. If there is no repentance, the second step is to bring them to the pastors and deacons to be admonished. If the result is still not repentance, the offender should be brought forward into the sacristy in front of more people. Last, if there is no change, the excommunication is pronounced and then announced publicly.

Luther introduces the question of which sins are dealt with by the church and which ones are dealt with by secular authorities. One gains some insight by looking at Luther’s excommunications themselves and his opinions on others. An excellent example of this is provided in the reasons behind Luther’s 1539 *Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent* (or *Invocavit* sermons), on 2 Corinthians 6:1–10, defending the Wittenberg church’s discipline of Johann von Metzsch. Metzsch was the elector’s prefect and captain in Wittenberg. Although he was a supporter of the Reformation and had been a help in the visitation of Saxony, he was a target of Luther’s ire. Luther admonished Metzsch on

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Mose legitur: Wenn man cadaver fand inter duas urbes, muste die nechste Stad hingehe, waschen et orare, ne sanguis &c.. Sol ich Ecclesiam regiren absente pastore, so mus so gehen, ut koenne verantworten. Du hast dich gescholten cum vicino et es offensus et offendisti. Ban ist nicht ein Tyran, sed Ecclesiae ernstlich straffe, das unrein auszufegen et peccatum zu reinen.”

155 WA 47:670; WA Tr 4:280 (LW 58:13).

156 WA 47:670; WA Tr 4:280 (LW 58:13).
several occasions. Metzsch was first disciplined in 1531 for his womanizing. In 1538 he was disciplined for his hoarding of food for himself and friends during a food shortage in the area. Luther withheld the sacrament until Metzsch sought and received absolution and until he reconciled himself with preachers and the town council.\textsuperscript{157}

Luther’s public ban of Clemen Schober provides another example. Clemen Schober was guilty of manslaughter, having killed a man in 1536.\textsuperscript{158} By 1539, however, Schober had reconciled with the victim’s family. He also paid a fine imposed by the Wittenberg city council. Although Schober came to terms with the civil authorities, Luther did not think this was enough. Since this was a public crime, Schober had offended the whole church and needed to be reconciled to it as well, or the Lord’s Supper would be withheld.\textsuperscript{159}

Both of these examples show the delineation of power between the church and the state and the power that may be exercised by each. The state could declare someone legally innocent but could not declare absolution and freedom from sin, as this could only be done by the church.\textsuperscript{160}

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Luther was very happy to extend the spiritual and theological authority of the church into areas that were the purview of secular authority. Some interesting instances point to this. In 1530 Luther threatened the

\textsuperscript{157} LW 58:11n27.

\textsuperscript{158} He had, with a rock, accidentally killed a man who had threatened him. See LW 58:12n28.

\textsuperscript{159} LW 58:12n28.

\textsuperscript{160} Another example of this was the Wittenberg jurist Kasper Beyer, whom Luther attacked in his sermon for Epiphany on January 6 and 13, 1544. Here he saw the state, at the instigation of the law faculty, “meddling in the Kingdom of Christ” by trying to reimpose canon law under the aegis of the prince; Martin Luther, \textit{Predigt am Epiphaniastage} (1544), WA 49:294–96 (LW 58:53ff).
excommunication of a woman who was selling her house for too high a price.\footnote{Ruth Götze, \textit{Wie Luther Kirchenzucht übte} (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1959), 9.}\footnote{Ibid., 22.} He also suggested that excommunication was appropriate for those engaged in usury.\footnote{See Ronald J. Sider, \textit{Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt: The Development of His Thought, 1517-1525} (Leiden: Brill, 1974).} Murder was also a reason for excommunication. In all of these examples, Luther believed that there is something more public involved here: these are sins that are committed in public and known by the church community. In these situations Luther believed that the behavior and its associated “scandal” required public accountability.

Starting with his home church at Wittenberg, Luther offered counsel to numerous congregations in their reforming efforts. Congregations at Altenburg, Leisnig, Zwickau, and Orlamunde (to name a few) all sought out Luther’s advice on putting Reformation principles into effect. Gerd Haendler, in his volume \textit{Luther on Ministerial Office and Congregational Function}, provides some very helpful insights based on Luther’s interaction with each of these congregations. The unifying theme is responsibility, \textit{congregational} and \textit{individual}.

Wittenberg serves as Luther’s first “consultation” on implementing Reformation principles. The situation had come to a head with Karlstadt’s “extreme” implementation of reform. While Luther was hidden away at the Wartburg, Karlstadt went forward to enact reforms throughout the Wittenberg church: sermons with no liturgical vestments, the Lord’s Supper in both kinds, removal of images, and the abolition of private confession.\footnote{On this last point, though Karlstadt had at first followed Luther in...}
declaring that any Christian, not only the clergy, could pronounce absolution to another, by the time he began to enact his full reform program at Christmas of 1521, he had come to deny that absolution itself had any value; it was only a human invention.\footnote{164 See Sider, op. cit., pp. 137-38, 144-46.}

Instead of educating and being patient with those who were coming around to Reformation principles more slowly than others, Karlstadt (and his followers) instituted changes in radical ways. For Karlstadt and others, one could not confine oneself to debate over the truth—one must also act.\footnote{165 Luther to Spalatin, December 12, WA Br 2:214, no. 108 (LW 48:353–55).} When Luther returned he saw the changes, the speed of implementation, and the violence that went with them, and he was concerned. In his view, Karlstadt had no Christian concern for those who were “weaker” in faith or not comfortable with the changes. The Invocavit Sermons, preached on Luther’s return to Wittenberg starting March 9, 1522, represent both Luther’s response to Karlstadt’s acts (and more importantly, to the congregation at Wittenberg) and instruction into the gospel and how it was to be applied. The primary subject matter of the sermons is not necessarily the rightness of the changes or whether they had any foundation in the gospel, but the responsibility of Christians to one another.\footnote{166 Full text of all Invocavit Sermons can be found in WA 10III:1–64 (LW 51:67–100).}

Three sermons are particularly helpful relative to a Christian’s responsibility to their neighbor. The of the Invocavit sermons: the first, second, and seventh (with some content of interest on confession in the eighth). In the first sermon, Luther emphasizes both the conscience and responsibility of Christians in each congregation.\footnote{167 Gerd Haendler, Luther on Ministerial Office and Congregational Function (Philadelphia:}
asserting that a Christian’s actions toward others should be based on the coming of Jesus.\textsuperscript{168} Fundamentally these are actions that are based in love and responsibility: “we must also have love and through love we must do to one another as God has done to us through faith . . . and here, dear friends, one must not insist upon his right, but must see what may be useful and helpful to his brother.”\textsuperscript{169} Despite the desire to do otherwise, each Christian is responsible through his or her actions (not just words) to do what Christ did for all. Although the officeholder (here, Karlstadt) did lead them in wrong direction, they nevertheless have a responsibility to do what is right based on their own understanding of the gospel. Luther believed that each Christian existed for others: “Let us, therefore, act with fear and humility, cast ourselves at one another’s feet, join hands with each other, and help one another.”\textsuperscript{170}

Luther continues this theme in his second sermon. He begins by reminding them that their whole life is based in faith and love. Faith is directed toward God and love toward human beings and one’s neighbors.\textsuperscript{171} The whole life of a Christian, then, consists of love and service to the neighbor based on what Christians have received from God without any merit of their own.

\textsuperscript{168} Martin Luther, \textit{Acht Sermon D. M. Luthers von ihm geprediget zu Wittenberg in der Fasten. Sonntag Invocavit bis Sonntag Reminiscere} (1522), WA 10III:3 (LW 51:79).

\textsuperscript{169} WA 10III:3 (LW 51:79). “Zum dritten müssen wir auch die liebe haben und burth liebe einander thun, wie uns got gethan hat durch glaben. . . . Alhie, lieben freündt, müß nitt ein jederman thûn was er recht hat, sonder sehen was seinem brüder nützlich und förderlich ist.”

\textsuperscript{170} WA 10III:8 (LW 51:73). “Darumb last uns das mit forcht und demüt handlen und eyner dem andern under den füssen liggen, die hende zû samen reychen, einer dem andern helffen.”

\textsuperscript{171} WA 10III:14 (LW 41:75).
Luther issues a strong warning in his seventh sermon about the importance of loving one another. If Christians do not love one another to the point of self-sacrifice, God will act: “And if you will not love one another, God will send a great plague upon you; let this be a warning to you, for God will not have his Word revealed and preached in vain.”

The eighth sermon has confession as its subject. Luther here praises and commends confession to all. Luther insists that it is acceptable for one Christian to go to another and confess, and the penitent should accept what another Christian says to him “as if God Himself had spoken it through the mouth of this person.” Gerd Haendler couches the *Invocavit* sermons in the context of responsibility and love. Indeed, it is within this emphasis on responsibility and love that Luther’s concern over confession and absolution fits and must be understood.

Beyond Wittenberg, Luther was corresponding with other communities very soon after delivering his *Invocavit Sermons*, and them giving advice on reforming their churches. For example, less than thirty days after the *Invocavit Sermons*, Altenburg requested Luther’s help. Altenburg was a traditionally Catholic city, but most of the city by now had embraced evangelical ideals. The challenge was that a clerical position had come open and Altenburg wanted to know who should choose the replacement: the

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172 WA 10III:57 (LW 51:96). “Und werdent jr nit einander lieb haben, so wirt got ein grosse plage uber eüch lassen gan, da richten eüch nach, dann got wil nicht vergebens sein wort offenbart haben und gepredigt.”


174 Haendler, 49.

175 Haendler, *Luther on Ministerial Office*, 55.
general public, the government, or the existing, Catholic ecclesiastical authorities. The Altenburg city council contacted Luther, and the Catholic provost contacted Elector Frederick. The solution, unsurprisingly, was simple for Luther. Since the Catholic hierarchy was not preaching the gospel, they forfeited their right to fill the position. The city council was now able to appoint an evangelical pastor. Luther cautions them, however, that this ability does not come from force. It comes from scripture. As seen above, Luther emphasizes that one of the responsibilities of each Christian is the ability to judge scripture. Christians are able to discern whether someone’s teaching is right or wrong, correct or false, and replace the bad with the good. As Haendler points out, this advice sounds very much like his first Invocavit sermon.\(^{176}\)

A similar opportunity presented itself later that year in the city of Leisnig. In this instance, Luther wrote a pamphlet to advise them, \textit{Das Eyn Christliche versamlung odder gemeyne recht und macht habe, alle lere tzu urteylen und lerer zu beruffen, eyn and abzusetzen, Grun und ursach aus der schrifft} (That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teachings and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture).\(^{177}\) Luther again affirms both the responsibility and right of the congregation to appoint its own pastors. In the process, he refers to four important passages, three of which will be listed here. The first is John 10, where Jesus says, “My sheep know my voice. . . . My sheep will not follow strangers, but

\(^{176}\) Ibid.

\(^{177}\) Martin Luther, \textit{Das Eyn Christliche versamlung odder gemeyne recht und macht habe, alle tzu urteylen und lerer zu beruffen, eyn and abzusetzen, Grund und ursach aus der schildt} (1523), WA 11:408–16 (LW 39:303–14).
they will flee from them, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”¹⁷⁸ The second is
the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus warns against false prophets: “You see, here,
Christ does not give the judgment to the prophets and teachers but to the pupils or
sheep.”¹⁷⁹ The last reference is 1 Thessalonians 5:21: “Test everything but hold fast to
that which is good.” Luther explains, “Among Christians each person is the judge of the
other person; on the other hand, he is also subject to the other person.”¹⁸⁰

With the rejection of the Catholic pastor, the Leisnig congregation only completed
one half of their call. The second half called them to take responsibility and be active in
choosing another pastor. Getting rid of the bad meant replacing it with the good, law
replaced with gospel. While they were not in an extreme emergency, the gospel not
being preached was enough of an emergency for the congregation to appoint someone to
fill the void. As Haendler puts it, “They were a congregation and they should act.”¹⁸¹

Each of these situations provided Luther with a chance to emphasize the
responsibility of the local congregation. What he wrote in the three tracts of 1521 (see
chapter 2) was now being applied at the practical level in these local churches. These
interactions make it clear that Luther expected each Christian to take seriously his or her
responsibility to the Word and their neighbor.

folgen den frembden nicht, sondern fliehen von yhn, denn sie kennen nicht der frembden stym.’”


widerumb auch dem andern unterworfen.”

¹⁸¹ Haendler, Luther on Ministerial Office, 62.
Another question arises in these case studies of what the definition and meaning of “order” is and when it is possible to override “order” for the sake of the gospel. The comparison of Wittenberg, Altenburg, and Leisnig provides some helpful contrasts. Wittenberg’s iconoclasm was a clear case of a lack of order and responsibility in applying Reformation principles. In that case, Luther was willing to allow some temporal compromise in order to respect those of weaker faith. At Altenburg, the situation was different. Physical destruction and upheaval did not accompany evangelical implementation as it had in Wittenberg. Here Luther was a bit more forceful, to the point that, even before meeting with the city council, he contacted Gabriel Zwilling to be ready to fill the position. On the surface, Luther was not as concerned with the established “order” as he was in Wittenberg. In Luther’s communications with Leisnig, moreover, it is clear that questions of order were secondary to the issue of the proclamation of the gospel. Luther saw Leisnig as an “emergency”—a situation in which there was no one assigned to preach the gospel, so a Christian had to step in. Luther compares this to the situation in Acts 8 and 18: “In such a case a Christian looks with brotherly love at the need of the poor and perishing souls and does not wait until he is given a command or letter from the prince or bishop. For need breaks all laws and has none. Thus it is the duty of love to help if there is not one else who could or should help.” This situation thus falls in the “emergency” category that I examined in Chapter 3.

182 WA Br: 2:507. One of the challenges with Haendler’s book is that his references to LW or are very slim. There are many spots, in other words, where Haendler quotes Luther but does not source the quote. I have attempted to find the original sources, but in some places I have not been able to.

183 Haendler, Luther on Ministerial Office, 62.

184 Luther, Das Eyn Christliche, WA 11:412 (LW 39:310). “Denn ynn solchem fall sihet eyn
The case of Leisnig reveals that Luther could set aside concern for “order” defined as traditional structures of authority, not in the name of anarchy, but for the sake of the Gospel, which had to be preached and where necessary established its own order. The circumstance determined the action. Hellmut Lieberg confirms this reading in *Amt und Ordination*. As seen in chapter 2, Lieberg believes that for Luther, the “konkretes Amt” grows directly out of the universal priesthood. The Word is given to the whole community, and out of that grows the need for a public ministry for order. Indeed, the reason for the existence of the special office is the preaching of the Word. As in all situations, the Word is accorded primacy. This prioritizing of the Word allows, for Lieberg, a theoretical time when the universal priesthood can displace the special priesthood to ensure the right preaching of the Word, which is the responsibility of the whole community. The public task is given from the people to an officeholder. The officeholder is then responsible for preaching, or to be more precise, fulfilling the task that he has been given to proclaim the Word by the “congregation” [*Gemeinde*]. When that is not taking place the congregation has the ability—no, the responsibility—to make sure it is preached. One or more people may take the responsibility while the community appoints a new pastor.

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Christen aus bruderlicher liebe die nott der armen verdorben seelen an und wartet nicht, ob yhm befelh oder briefe von Fursten oder Bischoff geben werde. Denn nott bricht alle gesetz und hatt keyn gesetze. So ist die liebe schuldig, tzu helfen, wo sonst niemand ist, der hilft oder helfen solt.”


186 Ibid., 65: “Die Gemeide als communio sanctorum ist es, der Christus Wort, Tafe, Abendmal, Schlussel und alle geistlichen Guter gegeben hat, und die darum auch allein Recht und Macht an ihnen hat.”
Lowell Green, however, regards this theology of the ministry as a preliminary stage of Luther’s doctrine which is eventually rejected. Green claims that Luther shifts his allegiances from the universal priesthood to the office of ministry from 1530 onward.\textsuperscript{187} The Wittenberg disturbances of 1521–1522, the peasants’ revolt of 1524–1525, and the Saxon visitations of 1527–1529 are seen as distinguishing the “young Luther” from the “old Luther” relative to his beliefs on the universal priesthood. As seen above, however, these distinctions create a false impression of the universal priesthood as a whole and the exercise of the keys in particular.

The reality is that no such substantial “change” in Luther’s thought occurred; though Luther emphasized the importance and power of the office of ministry to different degrees in different circumstances, he never set aside his theology of the universal priesthood. In the first place, for Luther, the difference between the two priesthoods is one of estate and not one of office.\textsuperscript{188} Green treats the relationship as a zero-sum game— one must have power and the other must not—thus presenting the relationship as fundamentally adversarial. Luther is more circumspect and nuanced than this. A discussion about the power of the universal priesthood is not one about rights but about responsibilities.\textsuperscript{189} Relative to confession and absolution, it is not a right to exercise the keys for one’s family and neighbors but a responsibility, a responsibility that Luther never rescinds or ceases to emphasize.

\textsuperscript{187} Green, 180.


\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 261.
An examination of writings like *De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae* (The Babylonian Captivity of the Church) (1520) and the later *Exposition of Psalm 110* (1535) shows that Luther did not change his fundamental beliefs. Quite the contrary, he continued to emphasize the need for both the office of ministry and the universal priesthood. More specifically, Luther insisted that the use of the keys was the responsibility of each baptized believer. One could and should use them freely, keeping the importance of the order of the church in mind. The possession and use of the keys is thus central to Luther’s understanding of the universal priesthood. One goes with the other with no exceptions.

Sermons and devotional writings can be and are often overlooked by historians. Theological writings or occasional writings are important, but a change of context often brings with it a new approach to the same doctrine. Often when one preaches, he or she emphasizes or highlights different points relative to their audience. This being the case, sermons are essential to painting a complete picture of Luther’s doctrine.

One set of sermons is particularly important. In the liturgy, the Gospel for *Quasimodogeniti*, the Sunday next after Easter, was John 20:19–31. Between 1521 and 1545, Luther preached fifteen sermons on the passage. This Gospel reading is of particular importance because it includes the important text from John on the binding and loosing of sins. Because of its prominent place in the liturgy, Luther was guaranteed to preach on it often. In fact, between 1522 and 1540 Luther preached on it no less than

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190 John 20:21: “Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’”
nine times.¹⁹¹ These sermons, both church and house, are extremely important to understanding Luther’s development of the universal priesthood, the office of ministry, and his understanding of absolution. These sermons will be examined here.

Luther preached the first sermon in 1522, which demonstrates the importance of the universal priesthood to Luther at this early stage: “Christ says here nothing about parsons or monks but speaks: ‘Receive the Holy Ghost. Whoever has the Holy Ghost, to him this power is given,’ that is, to whomsoever is a Christian. But who is a Christian? Whoever believes has the Holy Ghost. Therefore every Christian has power (like the pope, bishops, parsons, and monks) in this case to retain or remit sin.”¹⁹² Luther does not here override the importance of the office of ministry, but this passage does highlight the importance of the universal priesthood to Luther at this comparatively early stage in his thought.

In another sermon from the same year, titled “Of Love to Your Neighbor,” Luther emphasizes the responsibility of one Christian to be available to forgive another. Once again, the power is available to everyone. But Luther’s next step is the most helpful one. He informs us of the right way for a Christian to forgive another versus a pastor’s forgiving. The summary is simple—public versus private. Christians may exercise the

¹⁹¹ April 27, 1522; April 12, 1523; April 8, 1526; March 30, 1529; April 16, 1531; April 12, 1534; April 23, 1536; 1537; April 4, 1540.

power that God has given them, but only in private—between them and Christian friends. Again, order is the key here.

We all have the power, but no one should presume to exercise it publicly except for him who is chosen by the congregation. Privately however, I may indeed make use of it. For example, when my neighbor comes, saying “Dear friend, my conscience is burdened; speak an Absolution to me,” I may do so freely, but it must happen privately. If I decided to sit down in the church and wait for him to come, that would be inappropriate. Take an example from nobility: when there are many of them, power is given to one of them, through the consent of all, as regent over land and people. If everyone wanted to rule, what would happen then?\textsuperscript{193}

Here we have a complete picture. The issue of who is allowed to forgive whom is a matter of order, not a matter of spiritual power.

A year later, while preaching on the same passage, Luther again discusses the office of ministry and recognizes its importance but goes on to emphasize the importance of each Christian: “And this power is not given to clergy alone, but to all believers.”\textsuperscript{194} This is clearly an affirmation of the office of ministry and universal priesthood, neither superseding the other.

Luther’s sermons can be divided into two stages—before and after 1530. The split is relative not to a fundamental shift in teaching but to a relative emphasis on the universal priesthood (pre-1529) and the increased importance of the office of ministry (post-1529). Luther emphasizes two important points in the pre-1530 sermons. The first

\textsuperscript{193} WA 10III:97 (LW 69:331). “Wir haben alle die gewalt, aber nyemandt sol sich der vermessen oeffentlich zu ubenn denn der dartzu durch die gemeine erwelt ist, heymlich aber mag ich sie wol brauchen, als wenn mein nechter kommt, sagende: lieber, ich byn beschwert inn meinem gewissen, sprich mir ein absolution, so mag ich das thun freylich, aber heymlich muß geschehenn. Das ich mich hysetzen wollt in die kirche und darauff warten, wie wollt sichs reuemen?”

is the responsibility that each Christian has to his or her neighbor. Just as Christ did not look out only for himself, so each Christian should out of love seek the best for his or her neighbor.195 Second, the power of absolution is the right of all Christians and can be practiced privately: “We all have the power, but no one should presume to exercise it publicly except for him who is chosen by the congregation. Privately, however, I may indeed make use of it. For example, when my neighbor comes, saying, ‘dear friend, my conscience is burdened, speak an absolution to me,’ I may do that freely, but it must happen in public.”196 Luther also reiterates this point in sermons from both 1526 and 1529. Public absolution is only allowed by the called pastor, but privately it can be done by any Christian.

Responsibility is Luther’s concern here. Absolution should be offered to one’s neighbor because it is an example of how one can live for someone else and not for themselves: “When my neighbor errs, I should rebuke him; if he cannot follow me immediately, then I should wait patiently for him, as Christ did with Judas.”197 The point here is twofold. First, Luther is not giving neighborly absolution mere lip service. Rather, he sees it as a way to put into practice one’s love of neighbor as commanded by Christ.

195 Martin Luther, Predigt zu Borna am Sonntag Quasimodogeniti nachmittags (1522), WA 10:97 (LW 69:331).

196 WA 10:97 (LW 69:331) “Wir haben alle die gewalt, aber nyemandt sol sich der vermesenn oeffentlich zu ubenn denn der dartzu durch die gemeine erwelt ist, heymlich aber mag ich sie wol brauchen, als wenn mein nechster kommet, sagende: lieber, ich byn beschwert inn meinem gewissen, sprich mir ein absolution, so mag ich das thun freylch, aber heymlich muß geschehenn. Das ich mich hynsetzen wollt in die kirche und darauf warten, wie wollet sichs reuemen?”

197 Martin Luther, Predigt zu Borna am Sonntag Quasimodogeniti nachmittags (1522), WA 103:98 (LW 69:331). “Wenn mein nechster yrret, so sol ich yn straffen; kan er mir dann nit gleich folgen, so sol ich im gedultiglich harren, wie Christus that mit Judas.”
Second, it is absolutely acceptable for every Christian to provide absolution to his or her neighbor, as long as it is in private. The clear public/private distinction here is consistent with the rest of Luther’s writing as I noted above.

The second phase of Luther’s sermons on John 20 (post-1530) in actuality does not vary in substance from the first phase. Two things are different nonetheless. First, Luther spends a great deal of time, specifically in five of the post-1530 sermons, articulating what sin is, how to recognize it, what absolution is, and where its power comes from. Second, Luther spends a bit more time emphasizing that the divine institution and power of the office of ministry is a call to public ministry. Also, as noted above, he emphasizes the importance of school for the raising and instructing of pastors. By comparison, Luther spends much more time in these sermons on sin and absolution than he does on the office of ministry.

Despite these emphases, it should be pointed out that this emphasis is strictly relative to the public exercising of absolution. This emphasis does not in any way overshadow or downgrade the ability and expectation of the universal priesthood to provide absolution. In fact, quite the opposite is evident here. Luther actually mentions neighborly absolution in two of the later sermons.

In the *Quasimodogeniti* sermon of 1531, Luther emphasizes the importance both of the appointed pastor and of the layperson: “If you feel sins coming to life in yourself (and wish to be freed), do not run to St. James or to your works; go to your pastor. If you cannot avail yourself of one, go to your neighbor and brother and ask him to speak the

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198 Martin Luther, *Dominica Quasimodogeniti Iohan. 20* (1540), WA 49:142 (LW 69:436).
Word to you in the name of Christ. If you can believe this Word, then you have (forgiveness) as certainly as if Christ (himself had spoken). “199 There are two things to note here: first, Luther’s direction to go to a pastor first does not indicate a lack of power or importance of the layperson. It is a matter of order, like preaching. But unlike baptism and the Lord’s Supper, it is not considered an “emergency” situation to be without a pastor, as seen in the sermon from 1522—it is, rather, a matter of public versus private. He makes a very similar statement in 1536 when he directs the readers to go to a pastor first for absolution, and if they cannot find him, to go to a neighbor.200

Luther’s sermons on John 20 thus do not reveal the same apparent dichotomy that has been suggested based on his other writings. While his later sermons do emphasize the office of ministry, his major emphasis is on the definition of sin and absolution. Furthermore, he continues to put an emphasis on the role of laypeople in absolution, albeit in private as opposed to public modes. The sermons here reveal a larger emphasis on the universal priesthood. What is even more telling is Luther’s audience—laypeople, every Christian, the universal priesthood. There would be no doubt in one’s mind as they sat in the pew and heard Luther say the words above about what they were both allowed and expected to do—to absolve their neighbor if they were asked.

Luther makes it clear that lay Christians are allowed to engage in public acts of providing absolution. Unlike some before him, Luther does not make a distinction

199 Martin Luther, Predigt am Sonntag Quasimodogeniti (1531/1544), WA 34:326–27 (LW 69:394). “Tu autem si senties peccatum et liber esse volueris, lauff hyn zw deynem pfarher. Si illum non habes, tunc ad proximum fratem, qui tibi proponat hoc verbum. Kanstu dem gleuben, ßo wyrdt dyr nichts gewerren.”

200 Martin Luther, Dominica Quasi modo geniti in arce praesente Marchione Iohanne (1531/1544), WA 41:543 (LW 69:394).
between the *possession* and *use* of the keys – everyone is allowed to use them because everyone possesses them. Keenly aware not to allow the universal priesthood to trample on the office of ministry, he points out that everyone has a call not to an office, but to their neighbor. Luther’s eight *Invocavit* sermons are excellent proof texts for this. Lastly, the public use of excommunication (binding of sins) is further proof that it is not just the office that has the right to use the keys, but everyone’s. At the beginning of the study I set out to prove the central importance of the universal priesthood in Luther’s theology coupled with its close relationship with absolution. I believe that these previous chapters have done exactly that.

Now I move forward to the second part of the study, the universal priesthood and absolution to Spener. For me to reach Spener, I must pass through those who immediately came after Luther who carried on the new evangelical faith. These individuals would be forced to contend with defending this new faith in ever changing contexts, many contexts that Luther could have never imagined. The next chapter will examine those who came after Luther and how they continued the tradition he began and where, in some cases, they departed. This chapter of time is often called “Lutheran Orthodoxy.” I will pay close attention to the role of the universal priesthood and absolution in each of these theologians. I will also lay out some of the intra-Lutheran controversies that made carrying on Luther’s early theology so difficult.
CHAPTER FIVE
LUTHERANISM AFTER LUTHER

Introduction

Luther’s role began to change as the Reformation spread past Saxony. Eric Gritsch has suggested that by 1522: “Luther presided like a bishop over a fast-moving reform movement.” Luther was protected by powerful princes, surrounded by loyal friends, and constantly giving counsel and advice.¹ Those he advised became as important as Luther himself. Individuals like Philipp Melanchthon were charged with the responsibility of codifying and translating Reformation doctrine into new ecclesial and political contexts.² A whole second generation of newly termed Lutherans was forced to deal with internal and external pressures that challenged their doctrine.³ Several influential figures emerged to continue to define what it meant to be truly Lutheran.

This chapter will trace both the doctrines of universal priesthood and penance through several seminal figures that represent Lutheranism between 1550 and 1675 (the year Spener published Pia Desideria). Eight individuals will be examined here: Philipp Melanchthon, Matthias Flacius, Martin Chemnitz, David Chytreaus, Aegidius Hunnius, Johann Gerhard, Johann Arndt, and Johann Dannhauer. Studying these inheritors of Luther’s thought will make it clear what carried directly from Luther to Spener and what was

¹ Eric Gritsch, A History of Lutheranism (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 36.
² John Bugenhagen (pastor at Wittenberg Church), Nicholas von Amsdorf (installed by Luther as bishop of Naumburg in 1541), and Justus Jonas (translator of many of Luther’s works from Latin into German).
³ This time period is often referred to as “Lutheran Orthodoxy,” See ibid., 109ff.
changed along the way. Several things become clear. First, while the universal priesthood remains, it loses its practical significance. Second, Luther’s emphasis on “Christian brothers” hearing the confession of their neighbors and providing absolution all but disappears.

Church Orders

Luther’s visitation and church orders were the model for numerous others that arose in the years following 1527/1528. Many of these cities consulted with Luther on how to construct their orders. The proliferation of church orders illuminates the organization and official practice of the newly established Lutheran churches. They are a clue to the theological priorities taught to pastors and what the pastors then communicated to their own laity. A brief study of visitation and church articles reveals that confession and absolution were indeed a priority.

Two important studies compile the various church orders throughout the history of the Lutheran church. The first is Emil Sehling, Die Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhundert, 14 vols. (Leipzig and Tübingen, 1902–), and the second is Paul Graff, Geschichte der Auflösung der alten gottesdienstlichen Formen in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921). These works reveal the priority of the evangelical churches over the course of almost three centuries. An examination of these reveals that confession and absolution remain important priorities. A first church order is Kirchenordunge zum anfang, fur pfarherrn in Herzog Heinrichs zu Sachsen Furstenthum, from 1539.4 Twenty-three years

later in Magdeburg we again see the imprints of Luther’s doctrine of confession in their 
*Das Erbistum*. Confession and absolution are still a priority in Torgau’s *Verordnung der Visitatoren* in 1575.5 Other orders in Saxony and Schwarzpurg and Stalburg evidence the same thing. Private confession was retained in all of these areas.

Philipp Melanchthon

*Introduction*

Although only twenty-one, Melanchthon was already an accomplished humanist scholar when he was called by the elector to fill the chair of Greek languages at the University of Wittenberg in 1518.6 He quickly found himself embraced by the humanists and Luther as well. Luther saw Melanchthon as a welcome addition to the faculty and the two became quick friends.7

Melanchthon’s interest in theology grew in the presence of Luther. He submerged himself in the Bible, the letters of Paul in particular. He began an exposition of the Letter to the Romans in 1519 believing that it was the key to the New Testament. Melanchthon was promoted to “bachelor of the Bible” in 1520.8 Melanchthon’s ability made a quick

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5 Ibid., 1:683.

6 Robert Stupperich, *Melanchthon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 32. He had already published a Greek grammar, delivered lectures on Virgil and Cicero, and was well versed in philosophy, especially Aristotle.

7 Bernard Lohse, “Philipp Melanchthon in seinen Beziehungen zu Luther,” in *Leben und Werke Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546*, ed. Helmar Junghans (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1982), 403. Their friendship was so close that Reuchlin (his uncle) had moved to Ingolstadt and asked Melanchthon to join him, but Melanchthon refused, “I love my homeland, but I must also heed whither Christ calls me, not whither my own pleasure may draw me. . . . I will die rather than allow my self to be torn from Luther,” 353.

and deep impression on Luther. Commenting on Melanchthon’s disputation for his bachelor promotion, Luther said, “It is like a miracle to us all. . . . He will become the mightiest enemy of the Devil and of Scholastic theology.”

Melanchthon’s theological development drew him to Luther. Heinz Scheible gives an excellent description of their relationship: “To be sure, no one can deny that an intense relationship developed very rapidly between the two men. They worked together in teaching and research. Collaboration on translation and revising the Bible stretched over their entire lives. Indeed, this relationship had a strong emotional component.”

While not always seeing eye to eye, Luther viewed Melanchthon as a capable theologian and gave Melanchthon’s main theological work, *Loci Communes rerum theologicarum*, very high praise: “an unsurpassable book, worthy not only of immortality but also of churchly approbation.” Luther’s respect led him to allow Melanchthon to represent him at the Diet of Augsburg in Luther’s absence.

There is no doubt that Luther influenced Melanchthon. The question I will take up here is how much and in what way relative to the topic of the universal priesthood. Following a short introduction to Melanchthon’s key writings, three key areas will be examined and compared/contrasted with Luther’s positions found in the previous chapter:

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9 Ibid., 40.


11 Martin Luther, *De servo arbitrio* (1525), WA 18:601 (LW 33:16). “Locis Theologicis invictum libellum, meo iudicio, non solum immortalitate, sed canone quoque Ecclesiastico dignum.”

12 Luther was under imperial ban and unable to attend Augsburg.
the universal priesthood, the office of ministry, and the meaning of absolution and its use in the life of the church.

Melanchthon’s Writings

Melanchthon wrote official confessional, occasional/contextual theological documents, as well as sermons and commentaries. Each writing provides a unique insight into Melanchthon’s theology. A short introduction to a few of these writings will enable us to understand the context of each.

Loci Communes

The first edition of Melanchthon’s *Loci communes rerum theologicarum* (Fundamental theological themes”) was printed in 1521. This compendium of theological fundamentals reflects both Melanchthon’s theological development under Luther as well as his active participation in the first efforts for the realization of the Reformation in the church. \(^{13}\) The *Loci* is both a scriptural and philosophical analysis of theology, highlighting the major topics and developing them. He includes the topics of God, unity, Trinity, creation, sin, law, grace, hope, love, and others. \(^{14}\) Melanchthon gives two purposes for the *Loci*. The first purpose is “sketching a common outline of the topics that you can purpose in your study of Holy Scripture.” \(^{15}\) His desire is to summon students to

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15 Ibid., “Sed bulgarem quondam locorum formam adumbramus, quos in discendis saris literis squaris.”
the scriptures and to supply them with a “list of the topics to which a person roaming through scriptures should be directed.”

The second purpose is to demonstrate “how corrupt are all the theological hallucinations of those who have offered us the subtleties of Aristotle instead of the teachings of Christ.” Melanchthon sets out to explicate the themes that the Bible offers to humans: sin, law, and grace or the law and the Gospel.

Augsburg Confession (AC)/Apology/Variata

Frederick the Elector called the leading Lutheran theologians in the spring of 1530 to prepare a brief defense of the theological changes that had occurred in Saxony. The defense would then be presented at the Diet of Augsburg in the same year. The duty to organize and write these justifications fell to Melanchthon. Luther consented to Melanchthon’s writing of the document. Luther, as a condemned heretic, was unable to be a part of the proceedings. Luther strongly affirmed Melanchthon’s ability to present a succinct picture of evangelical doctrine: “I have read through Master Philip’s Apologia, which pleases me very much; I know nothing to improve or change it, nor would this be appropriate, since I cannot set so softly and quietly. My Christ, our Lord, help [this Apologia] to bear much and great fruit as we hope and pray.”

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16 MWS 2:4 (Pauck, Melanchthon and Bucer, 19). “Dum nomenclaturam tantum facimus locorum, ad quos velunti divertendum est erranti per divina volumina.”

17 MWS 1:4 (Pauck, Melanchthon and Bucer, 19). “Et quae sint in scripturis potissimum requirend et quam foede hallucinati sint ubique in re theological, qui nobis pro Christi doctrina Aristotelicas argutias prodidere.”


19 Gritsch, History, 45. Luther was just north of Augsburg in the Coberg castle.

Luther affirmed the work of Melanchthon in the AC, but not blindly. In a letter written on June 29, 1530, Luther responds to Melanchthon’s concerns that perhaps not enough concessions were made to the papists. Without laying out the concessions, Luther believes that Melanchthon has already made enough concessions.\(^\text{21}\) In a second letter, written on July 3 of the same year, Luther says that Melanchthon was “wrong and committed sin” when he demanded that the Gospel is the cornerstone and able to rule over the Roman Church (referring to Luke 19:14).\(^\text{22}\) Lastly, in a letter dated July 21 of the same year, Luther responds to Melanchthon’s concern over the use of ecclesiastical statutes. Melanchthon sees value for the statutes and seeks Luther’s advice about what to do with them. The problem for Luther is not with the statutes per se but with the cause for the statutes. Statutes cannot be placed upon or enforced by the bishop (or by anyone), even if they are godly. The bishop has no power to impose them on the church. This is especially true if the bishop is also functioning as a secular ruler.\(^\text{23}\)

The occasion for the writing of the AC is a bit complex. It is both a theological and political document, with objectives for both. The theologians were concerned with the content of the proclamation and the proclamation itself. Princes also had political interests. Leif Grane gives an excellent explanation:

> The other objective is not only political, but determined by judicial consideration as well. It was all-important for the princes that the case on behalf of the instituted reforms be made so that it would still be possible to understand the faith controversy as a legal conflict. These two objectives were of course closely related, since the law, even imperial law, was theologically based. The princes

could not simply give the theologians a free hand, however, because their very legitimacy as estates of the realm was at stake.\textsuperscript{24}

Because of these parallel objectives, the AC must be read with a careful eye. The document is never merely a \textit{theological} or \textit{political} document; it is always an amalgam of the two.\textsuperscript{25}

The Roman Church quickly responded to the AC. Evangelical princes wanted to respond and once again turned to Melanchthon. He referred to his response as an \textit{Apologia} (Apology), or defense, for the AC. The \textit{Apologia (AP)} was both a response to the Roman Church’s response to the AC and also a further development of the AC.

\textbf{Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope}

The evangelical estates received an invitation from Pope Paul III to attend the general council that was to be held in Mantua in 1537.\textsuperscript{26} John Frederick thought it would not be fruitful to attend what was clear would be a papal-dominated council. He did see a statement in response to be appropriate. He turned to Luther and requested a personal statement of faith that could be presented to the council. The document would be used to

\textsuperscript{24} Grane, \textit{Augsburg}, 19.

\textsuperscript{25} Further evidence to this is the fact that both theologians and princes were signers to the document. See Grane, \textit{Augsburg}, 19.

\textsuperscript{26} This council did not meet until 1545 in Trent.
clarify the evangelical position and represent a sort of mission and purpose statement.\textsuperscript{27}

Luther’s \textit{Smalcauld Articles} emerged from this request.\textsuperscript{28}

The Smalcauld League, which was the estate’s military alliance, met in Schmalkalden in early 1537 to discuss a response as well. They decided against using Luther’s newly penned \textit{Smalcauld Articles} as an official response to the papal council.\textsuperscript{29}

Instead they opted for the Augsburg Confession (penned by Melanchthon in 1530). Alongside the AC they added the \textit{Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope}, which Melanchthon had written during the meeting.\textsuperscript{30} The AC had omitted any statement about papal authority for political reasons, but the impending council made it necessary. Melanchthon addressed this in the \textit{Treatise}. The \textit{Treatise} was accepted and signed on February 24.

\textit{Melanchthon and the Universal Priesthood}

Melanchthon inherited Luther’s understanding of the universal priesthood, but did not have a lot to say about the doctrine itself. Ritschl makes the point that the doctrine is


\textsuperscript{29} Despite not being used as an official response by the League, most of those in attendance subscribed to the articles of faith as their own. The \textit{Smalcauld Articles} received official status when they were placed with the \textit{AC} in 1544, and by 1580 they were included in the \textit{Book of Concord}.

\textsuperscript{30} Luther was recovering from a kidney stone attack and was unable to attend the meeting or pen the document, hence the responsibility fell to Melanchthon.
very much in the background for Melanchthon. The question of the importance of the doctrine for Melanchthon will be discussed at length later. A closer examination of the content of the doctrine begins here.

The first question is what/who constitutes the universal priesthood. Melanchthon answers that question in his 1521 *Loci*: all Christians who have faith in Christ. “The thought of Peter is relevant here, ‘You are . . . a royal priesthood, a holy nation’ (1 Peter 2:9). For we Christians are kings because through Christ we are free from all created things, we rule over life, death, and sin, as I said above. We are priests because we offer ourselves to God and because we importune forgiveness for our sins.”

The identity of the universal priesthood is all baptized Christians. The next issue is that of responsibility. The 1521 edition of the *Loci* lays out the function of the universal priesthood—“orare, offerre, und placare,” or worship, sacrifice, and reconciliation. Melanchthon does not define worship here, but he does expand on sacrifice and reconciliation.

Sacrifice for Melanchthon means the sacrifice of the body. Each Christian must give one’s body over to God to accomplish His will. This sacrifice of the body to do the

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31 Hellmut Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination bei Luther and Melanchthon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1962), 259. Lieberg does not give the original citing in Ritschl’s work.


will of God is the only true sacrifice that exists in Christianity, outside of Christ’s
sacrifice.\textsuperscript{35} This includes prayer for one another, service to one’s neighbor, and prayer to
Christ.\textsuperscript{36}

The third responsibility is that of reconciliation. Reconciliation for Melanchthon
is accomplished in two ways: intercessory prayer and confession. Intercessory prayer is a
sign that one is a priest. Melanchthon nowhere goes into much detail on intercessory
prayer. I would suggest that in the context of sacrifice (giving of oneself), it is safe to
assume that this is intercessory prayer for others. We are left, however, to wonder if this
intercession would be for the salvation of others (hence included in the subject of
reconciliation).

The second way reconciliation is accomplished is through confession.
Reconciliation is both vertical (with God) and horizontal (with others). The universal
priesthood (every believer) has a role in confession. As seen above, one kind of
confession is the private confession that one Christian (Christian A) makes to another
Christian (Christian B) when Christian A has wronged Christian B. Melanchthon believes
this confession, which is modeled in Matthew 18:15, to be both private and personal.\textsuperscript{37}
The reconciliation is also thus limited to repentance for personal sins committed between

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 142. Like Luther, Melanchthon makes a distinction between private and public. Private is
defined as personal, and public is defined as official, as representing the church.
two people. Public (official) confession is reserved for the office of ministry, except in special circumstances.

Another responsibility that does not fall in any of the categories above is the choosing and calling of pastors in a local congregation. This is found in *Power and Primacy of the Pope*. The call to the office of ministry is a call that comes from God alone. How is that call made and affirmed? The calling and ordaining of those to the office of ministry comes in two forms. First, it can come through the ordination of individuals by regular bishops. While bishops are not spiritually superior to others (they are called out from the pastors), they do have the responsibility of ordaining. Second, it can come from local congregations. The bishop’s responsibility of calling and ordaining pastors does not take the right from the congregation. The simple presence of a bishop does not mean that they can exercise the right of calling and ordaining. As with all rights, the Gospel is of the highest importance:

As a result, when the regular bishops become enemies of the Gospel or are unwilling to ordain, the churches retain their right to do so. For wherever the church exists, there is also the right to administer the Gospel. Therefore, it is necessary for the church to retain the right to call, choose, and ordain ministers. This right is a gift bestowed exclusively on the church, and no human authority can take it away from the church. These words apply to the true church, which, since it alone possesses the priesthood, certainly has the right of choosing and ordaining ministers. . . . All of this makes clear that the church retains the right to choose and ordain ministers. Consequently, when bishops either become heretical or are unwilling to ordain, the churches are compelled by divine right to ordain pastors and ministers for themselves.39

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38 *BekS* 489 (*BoC* 340.66-67).

39 Ibid. “Itaque cum episcopi ordinarii fiunt hostes evangelii aut nolunt impertire ordinatioenem, ecclesiae retinent jus suum. Nam ubicumque est ecclesia, ibi est jus administrandi evangelii. Quare necessa est ecclesiam retinere jus vocandi, eligendi et ordinandi ministros. Et hoc just est donum proprie datum ecclesiae, quod nulla humana autoritas ecclesiae eripere potest . . . quae verb ad veram ecclesiam pertient quae, cum sola habeat sacredotim certe habet jus eligendi et ordiandi ministeros. Ex his omnibus liquet eccelsiam retinere jus eligendi et ordinandi ministros. Quare cum episcopi aut fiunt haeretici aut nolunt
Melanchthon emphasizes this right and responsibility of the local church here in the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*. He does not emphasize it a great deal in any of his other writings. Article 14 of the AC does not make a point to instruct how one should be “properly called” (*rite vocatus*); it emphasizes that only those who are properly called can publicly teach or administer the sacraments. Even the *Treatise* itself, after discussing the rights of the congregation, goes on to mention again that the fundamental distinction between the bishop and the rest of the presbyters is their task of ordination. This is the sole place where Melanchthon emphasizes the rights and the responsibility of the universal priesthood to call and ordain their own pastors.

**Melanchthon and the Office of Ministry**

Melanchthon spends a great deal of time developing and defending the office of ministry. The office (and its parts, such as ordination) shows up in numerous places throughout his writings: political, theological, and pastoral. Like Luther, a clear picture of

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impertire ordinationem, jure divino coguntur ecclesiae adhibitis suis pastoribus ordinare pastores et ministros.” “Darumb weil doch die verordneten Bischofe das Evengelio verfogen und tuchtige personen zu ordiniern sich wegern, hat ein igliche Kirch in diesem fall guest fueg und recht, ihr selb Kirchendiner zu ordiniern; denn wo die Kirche ist, do ist je der befelch, das evangelo zu prredigen. Darumb muessen die Kirchen die Gewalt behalten das sie Kirchen diener sordern, wählen und ordiniern. Und solche Gewalt ist ein Geschent, welchs der Kirchen eigenlich von Gott geben und von seiner menschlicher Gewalt der Kirchen fann genommen werden. . . . Diese Wort betreffen eigentlich die rechtedirchen, welche, weil sie allein das Preistertumb hat, mus sie auch die Macht haben, Kirchendiener zu wählen und ordiniern. Hieraus siehet man, das die Kirche Macht hat, Kirchendiener zu wählen und ordiniern. Darumb wenn die Bischofe eintweder ketzer sind oder tuchtige Personen nicht wollen ordiniern sind die Kirchen fur Gott nach gottlichen Recht Schuldig, ihnen zelf Pfarrherren und Kirchen diender zu ordiniern.”

40 Ibid., 47.

41 Ibid., 342.
his understanding of the office will help us understand its role relative to the universal priesthood.

The nature of the church is where one sees the significance of the office of ministry. God establishes the office for the sole purpose of the protection and promotion of the Word and sacraments.\(^\text{42}\) The church itself is defined by the presence of both, so there is an intimate connection between the office and the church itself. Melanchthon goes so far as to say that the office is a part of the church’s character. Consequently, if there is no office, there is no church.\(^\text{43}\) However, it is not just the presence of the office per se but the right relationship of the office to the larger church (ecclesia). Writing in the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, Melanchthon emphasizes not only the equality of each minister (pope and bishop are no greater) but also that the church is primary over the ministers. Referring to 1 Corinthians 3:21–22, Melanchthon writes, “Paul regards all ministers as equals and teaches that the church is superior to its ministers. Thus he grants neither preeminence nor lordship over the church or other ministers to Peter.”\(^\text{44}\)

Helmutt Lieberg lays out three proofs summarizing Melanchthon’s thought on the connection between the office and the church. First, Christ gave the keys (Schlüssel) directly to the church (Matt. 18). Second, the priesthood is established by God in the

\(^{42}\) Confession. Corpus Reformatorum 21:222 (hereafter referred to as CR).

\(^{43}\) Lieberg, Amt und Ordination, 282.

\(^{44}\) Power and Primacy of the Pope. BeKS 474 (BoC 331.11). “Paulus exaquat ministros et docet ecclesiam essa supra ministros. Quare Petro non tribuitur superioritas aut dominatio supra eccelsiam aut reliquos ministros.” “Machet paulsu alle Kirchendiner gleich und lehret daß die Kirchen meir sei dann die Diener. Darumb kann man mit keiner Warheit sagen, das Petrus einige Oberkeit oder Gewalt fur andern Aposteln uber die Kirchen und alle andere Kirchendiener gehabt habe.”
It is the presence of this priesthood that requires or demands (albeit in God’s freedom) the need for an office of ministry. Third, the church is the home of the Gospel and the office is needed to protect and promote the Gospel.\footnote{Leiberg, Amt und Ordination, 322–23.} A church that oversees Word and sacrament can call those who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus and followed him in baptism to fill this office.

This last point leads directly into discussion of right call and ordination. Lieberg is helpful here as he catalogs Melanchthon’s thought across the spectrum of his writings. The church owns the office and is responsible for filling it. A congregation must call any candidate for the office of ministry. No one can impose their presence or will on a local church.\footnote{Apology of the Augsburg Confession XII. BekS 292 (BoC 220.11).} The process for calling and ordination should not be taken lightly, as it is the character of the church that is at stake. There are four steps that the church goes through in order to guarantee the character of the person that is being called: \textit{approbatio}, \textit{comprobatio}, \textit{confirmatio}, and \textit{vocatio}. Each step in the process confirms both the divine call of the individual as well as the right of the church to make and affirm this divine call.

The efficacy of this calling and ordination is not based on human words or effort. In \textit{Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope}, Melanchthon challenges the four false claims that the papacy makes about its own power. The last two are the most important for this discussion. Melanchthon challenges the papacy’s notion that ordained priests carry any sort of \textit{character indelibilis} that guarantees their power. The priests’ power or
authority comes not from any human but from the Word of God alone. Melanchthon points out that Paul was neither ordained nor confirmed by Peter. Further, Paul never sought confirmation from Peter. It is neither the church nor the character of the candidate that guarantees their ability to carry out the responsibilities of the office: it is God’s Word alone that equips them. The Word both establishes the church as well as bringing forth competent individuals to fill the office that protects it. There still remains a question of the balance of power. The papacy claimed that the ministers were superior to the church, a claim Melanchthon challenges. Melanchthon believes all ministers are equal to other members of the church. They are all subservient to the Word and the church. Melanchthon points out that Peter was never given lordship or preeminence over the church. His one purpose was preaching the Word, not bringing tradition and new rules alongside the word.

The office derives its power, order, and authority directly from God alone. The Holy Spirit empowers the officeholder to accomplish the will of God and to be an instrument of spreading the Gospel. God’s empowering of the office thus makes the office the concrete expression and presence of God in the world. Melanchthon argues that obedience and deference to the office is equivalent to obedience to God.

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47 Power and Primacy of the Pope. BekS 472 (BoC 331.11).
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Melanchthon, Ordination. Loci Theologici Alia Disputatio: de Potestate ecclesiastica XXXIII (1545), CR 5:585.
51 Melanchthon, Theologici Disputationes Alia Disputatio: de Potestate ecclesiastica XXXIII (1545), CR 5:494.
The presence of both the universal priesthood and the office of ministry present a challenge over word and Sacrament. The importance of word and sacrament is conveyed through the idea of promise: God’s promise is contained in these visible signs. The church is the place where the promise of God in Jesus Christ is present. In the AC, Melanchthon expands on the importance of the presence of both word and sacrament. Here in article 7, Melanchthon defines the church as the assembly of the saints (universal priesthood and office of ministry) and as the place where the promises of God are made known to all.

Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph. 4:5–6.

The ability to have the word “rightly taught” and the sacraments “rightly administered” is not determined by the character of the assembly of the saints. Alongside the “congregatio sanctorum” are also “multi hypocratae et malii” mixed in with them. Their presence and

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even their administration of the sacraments does not remove the sacrament’s

efficaciousness. Melanchthon explains,

> Although the Church properly is the congregation of saints and true believers, nevertheless, since in this life many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled therewith, it is lawful to use Sacraments administered by evil men, according to the saying of Christ: The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat, etc. Matt. 23:2. Both the Sacraments and Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ, notwithstanding they be administered by evil men. They condemn the Donatists, and such like, who denied it to be lawful to use the ministry of evil men in the Church, and who thought the ministry of evil men to be unprofitable and of none effect.\(^53\)

Melanchthon allows for the sacraments to be administered by the universal priesthood.

The public administration of the sacraments is limited to the office of ministry.

**Melanchthon and Absolution**

Repentance and absolution hold a prominent place in Melanchthon’s theology. He mentions and develops it in every category of his writings (theological, biblical, quasi-political, dogmatic, etc). Repentance is central to believers’ lives since it is the main path along which they build their faith.\(^54\) While he does not consider it a sacrament, Melanchthon does consider it essential to the life of a believer. Repentance comforts the conscience and builds faith.

> For when the Gospel is heard, when absolution is heard, the conscience is uplifted and receives consolation. . . . At the same time, this faith is nourished in many

\(^{53}\) Ibid. “Quamquam ecclesia proprie sit congegratio sanctorum et vere credentium tamen, quum in hac vita mulit hypocriteae et mali admixi sint, licet uti sacramentis, quae per malos administrantur. Et sacramenta et Verbum propter ordinationem et mandatum Christi sunt efficacia, etiamsi per malos exhibeantur. Damnant Donatistas et similes, qui negabant licere uti ministerio malorum in ecclesia, et sentiebant ministerium malorum inutili et inefficax esse.”

ways in the midst of temptations through the proclamation of the Gospel and the use of the sacraments. For these are the signs of the New Testament, that is, signs of the forgiveness of sins. . . . Thus faith is formed and strengthened through absolution, through hearing the Gospel, and through use of the sacraments, so that it might not succumb in its struggle against the terrors of sin and death.55

Melanchthon adopts the classical model of repentance and its three principal parts: contrition (mortification), confession (seen most poignantly in his Articuli Visitationis, (Vistation Articles below), and absolution (satisfaction).56

Melanchthon clearly lays out his understanding of repentance in his Loci, giving very little room to contrition or mortification. Melanchthon sees no value in any level of “contrived” contrition. Humanity is unable to achieve the necessary amount of contrition. Reaching a requisite amount of sorrow necessary to match their own sinfulness is impossible. Contrition is only achieved through realization of the law through the power of the Holy Spirit, “for the law terrifies and slays our consciousness.”57 Sorrow or hate for sin is not enough. Contrition is a gift of the Spirit and only comes that way.

As mentioned above, enumeration of sins and true contrition were a flash point for Luther and others around him. Melanchthon’s debate with Johann Agricola represents

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56 Melanchthon, “Repentance,” Loci Communes (1521), MSW 2:149-150 (Pauck, Melanchthon and Bucer, 140).

57 Ibid. “Nam haec conscientiam terret et occidit.”
the disagreement well. The disagreement came to a head with the *Visitation Articles* of 1527 and the representation of law and Gospel.

Further, repentance and absolution are identifying marks of the church. Article 28, “Concerning the Church’s Power” (*De Potestate Ecclesiastica*) from the AC addresses the balance of power between the church and government. Melanchthon’s concern is to make it clear that the binding and loosing of sins is solely an ecclesial, rather than governmental, right and power: “This power is exercised only by teaching or preaching the Gospel and by administering the sacraments either to many or to individuals, depending on one’s calling. . . . Therefore, since this power of the church bestows eternal things and is exercised only through the ministry of the word, it interferes with civil government as little as the art of singing interferes with it. For the civil government is concerned with things other than the Gospel. For the magistrate protects not minds, but bodies and goods.”

Absolution is about eternal circumstances, not earthly ones. While this article is on the balance of these powers, what is interesting is the emphasis on the importance of the keys. The exercising of the keys becomes a central defining characteristic of the church for Melanchthon. The exercising is the manifestation of God’s command to teach the word of God: “However, they [our people] believe that, according to the Gospel, the power of the keys or the power of the bishops is the power

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of God’s mandate to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer the sacrament.”

Melanchthon’s emphasis on the importance of the keys is grounded in his understanding of Scripture. A significant passage for the keys is Matthew 18:18: “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” In his 1523 Annotationes in Evangelium Matthaei, Melanchthon takes the same approach to the keys as he does in his other writings; the power of the keys is the power of the church, not the state, and is central to its work. A look at his Quasimodogeniti sermons also reveals the same emphasis with regard to John 20:23 (“If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven”). As with Matthew 18:18, Melanchthon addresses this passage several times in his writings. His work on this passage is much more helpful. In a sermon from 1550 on John 20, Melanchthon affirms the necessity of private absolution in the church: “[There is] a private absolution, if the voice of the Evangelist is retained without fear/superstition, instituted by God, and it therefore must not be done away with.” This is the responsibility of pastors and apostles. An extremely important passage for Luther along these lines is Psalm 110:4: “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’”

59 Ibid. “Sic autem sentient, postestatem clavium seu potestatem episcoporum iuxta evangelium potestatem esse seu mandatum Dei praedicandi evangelii, remittendi et retinendi peccata et administrandi sacramenta.” “Nun lehren die Unseren also, das der Gewalt der Schlussel oder der Bischofen sei, laut des Evangeliums, ein Gewalt und Befehl Gottes, das Evangelium zu predigen die Sunde zu vergeben und zu behalten und die sacrament zu reichen und handeln.”

60 Annotationes in Evangelium Matthaei . MWS 4:191.

61 Melanchthon, Postilla Iohannin, CR 24:758. “Privata absolutio si retineatur sine superstitione est vox Evangelii, instituta a Deo: non est igitur abolenda.”
Melanchthon only deals with this passage once specifically (1555), he stays faithful to his position that priests proclaim the word of God in absolution.\textsuperscript{62}

\textit{Melanchthon and Visitations}

Luther petitioned Elector John of Saxony to examine both the economic and religious affairs of the parishes throughout the region in 1526. His concern was twofold. First, Luther was concerned about the economic status of the clergy in light of all of the church property being confiscated. Second, he was concerned about the level of evangelical theological knowledge among the clergy. Roman power and theology had been overthrown and evangelical principles applied, but there was no guarantee of their right practice or staying power. Luther was concerned that clergy were applying the new doctrines correctly and that they were recognized as evangelical.\textsuperscript{63} Visitations began a year later.

Luther asked Melanchthon to write up instructions and doctrinal expectations for all congregations. Melanchthon finished the \textit{Articuli Visitationis (Articles of Visitation)}, in 1527. The elector asked Luther to write a preface to the articles in order to provide further direction on how they should be applied. This was published in 1528.\textsuperscript{64} While originally composed by Melanchthon, the content is wholly a product of Luther’s

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Melanchthon, \textit{Annotations in Psalms}, MSW 4:191. “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’” Matt. 18:18: “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”
\item \textsuperscript{63} Conrad Bergenhoff, introduction to \textit{Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony}, LW 40:265.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
thought. The publication of these instructions was the opportunity for the first controversy for the new “Lutherans.” Johann Agricola was unhappy with the presentation of the role of law in the life of the believer, in particular its role in conversion. Hence the beginning of the “antinomian controversy.”

Melanchthon taught that there is no way we can make satisfaction for our sins. Satisfaction is found only in Christ alone, “but we also must know that God on account of Christ will forgive sin and that we attain to forgiveness through faith, if we believe that God will forgive sins on Christ’s account.” Melanchthon wrote that clergy were to teach two things. First, “we should awaken people to fear,” the fear of God’s wrath in particular. Second, “we should awaken people to faith,” the presentation of the Gospel message.

Melanchthon and Luther believed that both law and Gospel must be taught. One had to realize one’s own mortality and death before faith could arise in the individual. More specifically, mortification comes before faith. The law and the accusation that comes with it leads to guilt, repentance, and finally forgiveness through the Spirit. Agricola believed the opposite: that faith preceded mortification and that the law leads not to repentance but to anger, pushing the individual farther away from God and his forgiveness.

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66 Ibid., 297.

67 Ibid.

Melanchthon spends much more time developing the second part of repentance, namely, confession, which he provides a definition of in his *Loci*.

From one point of view, confession acknowledges our sin before God and condemning ourselves. This confession is not different from mortification and true contrition [referring to 1 John 1:9; Psalm 51:3, 32:5]. Without this confession there is no forgiveness of sins. On the other hand, when we make a confession in which we accuse and condemn ourselves and attribute to God true glory and righteousness, forgiveness must follow.69

Melanchthon also allows for private confession. He identifies three kinds of private confessions. The first confession is to God. Second is the kind in which “we are privately reconciled with those whom we have offended.” Here Melanchthon refers to Matthew 5:23 and then James 5:16: “Therefore confess your sins to one another,’ that is, let one intercede for the offense of the other.”70 The third is what Melanchthon refers to as ecclesiastical private confession. Other confessions are “traditions of men.” Here he refers to the requirement of enumerating all of one’s sins and other practices in confession that according to Scripture were unnecessary.71

Absolution follows contrition and confession. Melanchthon emphasizes four aspects of absolution. First, while absolution is not a sacrament, it is as important as

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71 Ibid.
baptism and should be retained.\textsuperscript{72} Second, Christ is central to repentance; it is the Gospel of Jesus that

They should therefore believe that on account of Christ their sins are freely forgiven. This faith uplifts, sustains, and gives life to the contrite according to Romans 5:1. The contrition of Judas or Saul was useless for the reason that it lacked the faith that grasps the forgiveness of sins granted on account of Christ. Accordingly, the contrition of David and Peter was beneficial because faith was added, which apprehends the forgiveness of sins given on account of Christ.\textsuperscript{73}

It is on account of the work of Christ that repentance is effective and absolution comes. Third, absolution is true and effective because it is based on the word of God and not the word or actions of men. Here Melanchthon refers to the woman forgiven in Luke 7:36–50. The Word is everything: “Christ says in Luke 7:47 ‘Therefore I tell you, her sins which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.’ For Christ interprets this very statement when he adds v. 50 ‘Your faith has saved you.’ Christ did not intend to say that the woman had merited the forgiveness of sins by her work of love. For he clearly states ‘your faith has saved you.’ But faith is that which grasps God’s free mercy on account of God’s Word.”\textsuperscript{74} All absolution is dependent on God’s word of

\textsuperscript{72} Melanchthon holds to the same understanding of a sacrament as Luther - there must be a visible outward sign to accompany the Word of God.


\textsuperscript{74} Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV. BekS 190 (BoC 144.152-153 ). “Ita Lucase 7 ait Christus: Remittuntur ei peccata multa, quia dilexit multum. Interpretatur enim se ipsum Christus cum addit: Fides tua salvam te fecit. Non igitur voluit Chrsitius quod mulier illo opere dilectionis merita esset remissionem peccatorum. Ideo enim clare dicit: Fides tua salvam te fecit. At fides est, quae apprehendit misericordiam propter verbam Dei gratis.” “Daß aber Christus Luca am 7 Kap Spricht:"Thr werden viel Sunden vergeben werden, denn sie hat viel geliebet,” da legt Christus sein Wort selbst aus da er sagt:”
promise as it is seen, heard, and experienced in the person and work of Jesus. Four, true absolution is only found in the church, the body of Christ. Melanchthon’s chief concern here is to separate out the powers of the government from the powers of the church. In his 1543 edition of the Loci, he comments on Matthew 18:18, on the binding and loosing of sins. The process of repentance is strictly limited to the spiritual and not the temporal. Sins are loosed and bound, but nothing else can be “tied” to an individual spiritually. Melanchthon stays consistent on this point in the Augsburg Confession. In article 28, titled “Power of the Bishop,” Melanchthon once again emphasizes that the church has charge of spiritual affairs (including absolution) and that temporal power does not protect the soul. 75 The crown thus may not administer absolution nor hold it back from anyone. This emphasis on the church’s sole right to exercise absolution is also found in several of Melanchthon’s commentaries.76

Along with the Articuli Visitationis (Articles of Visitation), written in 1527, Melanchthon penned two important writings on penance: De Poenitentia (1548) and Doctrina de Poenitentia (1549). Each document emphasizes the same points: the importance and right understanding of penance. Melanchthon published his Examen Ordinandorum in 1559. This served as an instruction for those who were candidates for ordination. In a section on penance, he gives an explanation of penance, directions on how to handle it properly, the parts, the meaning of contrition, and so on.

Dein Glaub hat dire geholfen.” Und Christus will nicht, daß die frau durch das Wert der Liebe verdienet habe vergebung der sude, darum sagt er flar: “Dien Glaub hat der gerholfen” Nu ist das der Glaub wlecher sich verläffet auf Gottest Barmherzigfeit und Wort.”

75 The Augsburg Confession XXXVIII. BekS 399 (BoC 92.12-18).

76 Melanchthon, Annotations in Psalmos, MSW 4:191.
Melanchthon clearly valued confession. Those who would read the Articuli Visitationis, (Visitation Articles) or his work in the AC can see its importance. Melanchthon does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of the universal priesthood’s exercising of the keys. What is clear is that the office of ministry should be exercising them. The next section will reflect further on the two priesthoods and their ability or responsibility in exercising the keys.

The Power of the Keys: Uses in the Office of Ministry and the Universal Priesthood

Repentance is central to Melanchthon’s theology. As mentioned above, while he does not consider absolution a sacrament, he does consider it essential. The question we now consider moves from the “what” of repentance to the “how.” Does Melanchthon continue the new trajectory of Luther, emphasizing the importance of the universal priesthood, or does he emphasize the office of ministry over and above the universal priesthood?

Hearing confession and providing words of absolution are central tasks for the holder of the office of ministry. As laid out above, the keys are given to the church. The church is represented in word and sacrament by the duly appointed and ordained pastor of the local congregation. In referring to Matthew 18, Melanchthon asserts that this is where the office of the keys is established.77 We recall Melanchthon’s understanding of repentance. There are four kinds, one public and three private.78 The first three are the sole property of the office of ministry. They represent the “public” and official role of the

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77 “Repentance”. Loci Theologici (1521), MSW 2:151 (Pauck, Melanchthon and Bucer, 142).
78 See the above section on Melanchthon’s understanding of repentance.
office. The only role that the universal priesthood plays is one in which a Christian hears another’s confession for wronging them. When this happens it is considered private and (we assume) unofficial (relative to the church and the office of ministry). There are only two exceptions that Melanchthon makes for allowing the universal priesthood to exercise the keys publicly.

The first exception is in case of emergency. In Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope Melanchthon makes a point that could possibly be transferred to his understanding of the universal priesthood and a public use of the keys. The church must have the right of choosing and ordaining ministers “just as in an emergency even a layperson grants absolution and becomes the minister or pastor of another. So Augustine tells the story of two Christians in a boat, one of whom baptized the other (a catechumen) and then the latter, having been baptized, absolved the former. Pertinent here are the words of Christ that assert the keys were given to the church, not just to particular persons (Matthew 18:20).” When faced with an emergency, a layperson may voluntarily step into the office of ministry in order to guarantee the faithful discharge of the office, presumably then giving up the office when a rightly called and ordained officeholder becomes present (though Melanchthon does not officially state this). It

79 Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope. BekS 491 (BoC 341.67-68). “... sicut in causu necessiatis absolvit etiam laicus et fit minister ac pastor alterius, sicut narrat Augustinus historiam de duobus christianis in navi, quorum later baptizaverit et is baptizatus deinde absolverit alterum. Huc pertinent sententiae Christ, quae testantur claves ecclesiae datas esse, non tantum certes personis.” Melachthon credits the “boat” reference to Augustine. Gratian has it in his Decretum (bk. 3, dist. 4, chap. 36) and credits it to Augustine in a letter to Fortunatus. There is a somewhat parallel discussion in Augustine’s Epistle 228, to Honorarius. The parallel consists of the mention of a boat and unbaptized occupants but it is not the same. Friedberg’s edition of Gratian notes that the citation may come by way of Ivo of Chartres, Decretum 1.191. For all this see Emil Friedberg, Eine neue kritische Ausgabe des Corpus iuris canonici: 1. Das decretum Gratiani (Leipzig: Druck von Edelmann, 1876), 1374.
would be safe, then, to conclude that this practice could be carried over to exercising the keys more broadly as well.

The second exception is found in the Loci. Melanchthon is pointing to the possibility of lay absolution. In laying out the various kinds of confession, Melanchthon refers to private absolution as the kind of repentance in which “we are privately reconciled with those whom we have offended.” What is interesting and curious are the Bible verses that he cites: Matthew 5:23 and James 5:16. His interpretation of James 5:16 is particularly interesting: “‘Therefore confess your sins to one another,’ that is, let one intercede for the offense of the other.”

This exhortation is different from seeking forgiveness for the one you have wronged. These comments leaves open the possibility of any Christian being able to provide absolution for any sins. Melanchthon, however, does not elaborate further.

Conclusion: Luther and Melanchthon Compared

The inheritance that Melanchthon received from Luther is both rich and informing, but he doesn’t follow him blindly. A comparison of their thought on repentance, the universal priesthood, and the office of ministry will help us to see the differences.

Repentance is a topic on which Melanchthon and Luther find consensus. Both agree on the central importance of confession as a communication of the word. They also hold the same views of on the principal parts of repentance and the definition of those parts (e.g., the useless nature of true human-based contrition). Where they differ greatly

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80 “Repentance,” Loci Communes (1521), MSW 2:153 (Pauck, Melanchthon and Bucer, 144).
is on the use of the keys. They distinguish between public confession (official) and private confession (unofficial). Melanchthon sees no role for the priesthood relative to public confession and sees a limited role in private confession (see above). He does allow for exceptions based on emergency, but this exception is assumed rather than expressly stated.\(^\text{81}\) Luther envisions a very active role for the priesthood, not limited merely to the private sphere, but open to the public one as well. Melanchthon significantly curtails the use of the keys by the universal priesthood.

The universal priesthood and office hold different meanings for the two authors. Luther neither subordinates the priesthood to the office of ministry nor raises it up over the office. They serve each other’s needs based on their specific roles vis-à-vis the need for order in the church. Luther sees the office of ministry growing out of or finding its source in the universal priesthood. Luther sees the universal priesthood in any embodiment of the office and its principles. Melanchthon disagrees, as Lieberg points out.\(^\text{82}\) The universal priesthood has value in as much as it is the reflection and representation of the word and sacraments, but Melanchthon does not consider the office to be an “embodiment” of the universal priesthood. Luther and Melanchthon are, however, very much in step relative to the character, nature, and call of the office of ministry.

Lieberg summarizes the differences well. First, he suggests that Melanchthon generally has a more positive view of the episcopacy than Luther.\(^\text{83}\) Second, the office for

\(^{81}\) See note 630 above.

\(^{82}\) Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination*, 266.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 383
Melanchthon is the greatest palladium (“protector”) of both the church and its ordinances.\textsuperscript{84} Lieberg suggests that Luther and Melanchthon are different but provide readers with two paths to understanding the universal priesthood, the office of ministry, and the relationship between the two. At some level, Lieberg is correct. They provide alternative takes on the relationship, which help readers understand what is at stake. Alternatively, I am not sure that Lieberg understands the gravity of the differences here.

As prone to overstatement as Ritschl may be at times, he articulates the situation better. According to him, Melanchthon does not merely to overvalue the episcopacy and therefore shrink the space that can be occupied by the universal priesthood. Rather, the universal priesthood itself has moved into the background quite apart from any emphasis on the office. He simply finds less practical significance than Luther does. Coinciding with this reduction in values comes a theological change in the nature of the priesthood and/or the office. It is hard not to detect in Melanchthon a sense of character indelibilis for those in the office—something that both he and Luther reject. Melanchthon’s silence on why the universal priesthood and its use leaves the question of why unanswered. His silence in fact leaves many questions unanswered. What is at stake here is not merely two different paths or roads but a fundamentally different theological understanding of ministry itself.

The universal priesthood and its use of the keys is very much absent from Melanchthon’s writings. When he does mention the keys, it is almost exclusively in the context of the office of ministry. The most likely place for the exercising of the keys to

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
come up relative to the universal priesthood is in his sermons and commentaries, particularly Matthew 18:18 and John 20:23 (Quasimodogeniti sermons). While Melanchthon makes it clear that the universal priesthood exists and private absolution is available to everyone, he definitely limits the provision for absolution to the office of ministry. This is consistent with his thought going back twenty to thirty years.

We are faced with the simple fact that Melanchthon does not see an important connection between the universal priesthood and the use of the keys. Further, Melanchthon does not envision a huge role for the universal priesthood in general. The importance of the priesthood is its special place relative to the use and representation of the word and sacraments in that it is the universal priesthood that participates in the sacraments. Melanchthon thus emphasizes the importance of the office of ministry. The difficulty is knowing whether Melanchthon’s silence on the issue communicates an intentional shift away from the universal priesthood or whether he simply assumes that his readers understand its role based on Luther’s writings. In either case, his silence is certainly unfortunate.

The most conspicuous exception to Melanchthon’s silence on the universal priesthood confirm an intentional shift. Though Melanchthon, in the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, comes closest to Luther’s insistence that the keys belong to all Christians, the reality is that the Treatise is not the best representation of
Melanchthon’s own thought. It is a commissioned piece; one in which he was writing to represent best the position of the Smalcald League, not his own. So the mention of the universal priesthood does not necessarily even represent Melanchthon’s thought or position, but that of the burgeoning evangelical church. This certainly would not be the first time. In his subscription to the Smalcald Articles, Melancthon includes this postscript, “... also regard(s) the above articles as true and Christian. However, concerning pope I maintain that if he would allow the Gospel, we, too, may (for the sake of general unity among those Christians who are now under him and might be in the future) grant to him superiority over the bishops which he has ‘by human right.’”

Melanchthon’s allowance for the pope, given what we know about Luther, is truly his own opinion. So perhaps the disconnect between the Treamtise and the AC is not inconsistency but is based on the contextual purpose of the writing.

Second, perhaps the difference can be found in Melancthon and Luther’s political theology. James Estes does an excellent job of laying out the central elements between the two. Luther made it quite clear that he believed that secular authorities had no sway in the religious realm. He was incensed by the fact that Duke George of Saxony had tried to suppress the circulation of Luther’s New Testament. On Secular Authority, written in

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87 Treatise on the Primacy and Power of the Pope. BekS 463–64 (BoC 326.5). “Suprapositos articulos approbo ut pios et christianos. De pontifice autem stauo si evangeliun admitteret, posse ei propter pacem et communem tranquillitatem christianorum, qui jam sub ipso sunt et in posterum sub ipso sunt et in posterum sub ipso erunt, superioritatem in episcopos, quam alioqui habet jure humano, etiam a nobis permetti.” “Philippus Melanchthon halt diese obgestallte artikel auch fur recht und christlich vom, Bapt aber halt ich, fo er das Evangelium wollte zulassen daß ihm umb friedens und gemeiner Einigfeit willen derjenigen Christen, so auch unter ihm find und funstif sein möchten sein Superiorität über die Bischofe, die er hat jure humano, auch von uns zuzulassen und zu geben sei.

1523, crystallized his thought on this and the doctrine of the two kingdoms in general.\textsuperscript{89} As Estes rightly points out, this text was central for Luther from 1530 forward as he defended the burgeoning evangelical church’s right to worship without the government meddling in their affairs.

Melanchthon had a much different view. In his \textit{Themata ad sextam feriam discutienda} (\textit{Themes about Six Holidays being Struck Down}) published in 1522, Melanchthon presents a contrary viewpoint. He emphasizes both the distinctive and complementary roles of ecclesial and secular authorities.\textsuperscript{90} Melanchthon was more optimistic about the role that the secular authority could play in spiritual matters.

A great litmus test for their views is the \textit{Articuli Visitationis} (\textit{Visitation Instructions}). Melanchthon believes that the prince has an obligation to compel the visitation and to ensure results.\textsuperscript{91} Luther vehemently disagrees, as seen in his preface to the \textit{Instructions}: secular rulers have no authority in spiritual matters. This does not mean that the Luther did not call on the prince, per se. Rather, he did not call on him as a prince but as a fellow Christian. Though Estes calls this distinction “cumbersome,” it is nevertheless important.

Recently Estes has argued that the chasm between Luther and Melanchthon is not as great as once thought. In \textit{Peace, Order and the Glory of God: Secular Authority and the Church in the Thought of Luther and Melanchthon, 1518–1559} (2005), Estes argues

\textsuperscript{89} Martin Luther, \textit{Temporal Authority and to What Extent it Should be Obeyed} (1523), WA 11:246–71 (LW 45:77–129).

\textsuperscript{90} Melanchthon, \textit{Themata ad sextam feriam discutienda}. MSW 1:68–70.

\textsuperscript{91} Estes, “Godly Magistrates,” 472.
that by 1535 Luther’s thoughts had gradually come in line with Melanchthon’s. David Whitford has countered Estes’s position. Despite the fact that Melanchthon’s concept of *cura religionis* was prominent post–Peace of Augsburg, Whitford does not see any evidence that Luther has changed his fundamental position and that the involvement of princes is strictly allowed only in emergency situations.\(^92\)

This comparison between Melanchthon and Luther is telling. Melanchthon’s context is different from Luther’s. The context allowed (or forced) Melanchthon to focus on or introduce perspectives that Luther either could not or would not. The differences between the two did not quench their relationship: Luther spoke highly of Melanchthon’s work in the AC and in correspondence with Spalatin. Nevertheless, one would be blind not to see the shift that takes place from Melanchthon onward relative to the universal priesethood and the office of ministry. Not until the writings of Johann Arndt and Johann Dannhauer will we come this close to Luther again.

Matthias Flacius (Illyricus)

Alongside Melanchthon, and often, after Luther’s death, in opposition to him, Matthias Flacius is also seen to be a leading candidate for the title of the successor of Luther and the Reformation.\(^93\) Flacius was born in Istria (ancient Roman Illyricum) in 1520; it was then part of the republic of Venice in Italy. Well educated in his younger years, he arrived in Wittenberg in 1541, where he studied under and worked with

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\(^92\) David Whitford, “Cura Religionis or Two Kingdoms: The Late Luther on Religion and the State in the Lectures on Genesis 1,” *Church History* 73, no. 1 (2004). 11.

Melanchthon. He accepted the chair of Hebrew at the university in 1545. Flacius generated great expectations in Luther.

Flacius’s early support for and relationship with Melanchthon became strained in the wake of the Schmalkald War, beginning with the Augsburg Interim (1548). The Interim mandated that all estates of the empire “live and dwell together piously and peacefully” until the general Council at Trent had dealt with the religious issue. The document was based on theological and ecclesiastical negotiations between Catholic and Lutheran theologians. Though the Catholic Church made some concessions to the Lutherans, specifically in the areas of clerical marriage and the distribution of both elements to the laity, they forced other areas of practice and belief on the established Lutheran churches. They were commanded to reintroduce invocation of the saints, prayer for the souls in purgatory, processions, festivals, consecration, vestments, votive masses, and the seven sacraments. They also extended the practice of private Masses.

Flacius was fundamentally concerned with staying true to Luther’s doctrine. He did not believe that Melanchthon shared the same concerns. Melanchthon was calling for acquiescence to the imperial law, while Flacius was calling for resistance to it. Oliver

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95 Ibid., 322.

96 Gritsch, History, 66.

97 Olson, Matthias Flacius, 85.

98 Ibid., 88. Carl Hieronymus, Wilhelm Sillem, ed. Briefsammlung des Hamburgischen Superintendenten Joachi Westphal aus den Jahren 1530 bis 1575 (Hamburg: Lucas Gräf & Sillem, 1903), 90f. Olson cites that this is an undated letter that was addressed to the church in Hamburg.
Olson has reprinted a lengthy letter that Flacius wrote to the church in Hamburg addressing the interim. He rejects out of hand Melanchthon’s acceptance of the Interim.

Since we are being pressured to despise the truth, all the angels and men, especially the faithful, ought to be thinking constantly about what should be done to preserve the doctrine and the church of Christ, it seems to me, having considered the matter carefully and having thought about current conditions, that, after prayer, nothing would be more appropriate and useful, than if we, in a dignified and prudent fashion, would publish a protest against the Interim and all perversions of our doctrine, written in the name of all those who want to sign it.99

Instead of this compromise, he makes a request for a fair and free council, claiming that his request is in line with Luther’s long-standing request of a free council.100 Flacius saw himself as protecting the true Lutheran doctrine from those who would make some of its most important aspects adiaphora, or “matters of indifference.”101 According to Otto Ritschl, Melanchthon’s “compromise” of Luther’s doctrine was seen as a failure of leadership. He had been reduced to being the leader of a party, the “Philippists.”102

Flacius exercised his influence over Lutheran theology/orthodoxy through his numerous publications. They ranged from historical studies, to sermons, and to confessions of faith: De voce et re fidei (1555), Confessio Waldensium (1558), Konfutationsbuch (1559), Centuriae Magdeburgenses (1559–1574), Clavis Scripturae

99 Ibid.
100 Ibid., 89.
102 Olson, 93.
Sacrae seu de Sermone Sacrarum literarum (1567) and Glossa compendiaria in Novum Testamentum (1570).\textsuperscript{103}

His influence is seen in two very important documents: first is the Formula of Concord (1577),\textsuperscript{104} and second is the Magdeburg Confession or Magdeburg Bekenntnis—Confessio et Apologia Pastorum et Reliquorum Ministrorum Ecclesiae Magdeburgensis. Though Flacius did not personally write this second document, it does represent his thought. The document was presented it in 1550.

After leaving Wittenberg in 1549 Flacius arrived in Magdeburg, which had become the center of Lutheran resistance to the empire and the Interim.\textsuperscript{105} The victorious Charles V had placed the city under the imperial ban for its opposition; the military task of securing its submission was assigned to the new Saxon elector, Maurice. (Although Maurice himself was Lutheran, his own political interests superseded his religious allegiance.) The whole city was placed under siege.\textsuperscript{106} The imperial army numbered between sixteen and twenty thousand, while that of Magdeburg was a mere three thousand.\textsuperscript{107} Magdeburg resisted for over a year, until after thirteen months, the siege ended in a negotiated agreement. On November 8, 1551, “Maurice himself made his

\textsuperscript{103} The best summary of Flacius’ printed works can be found in Olson, 337ff.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{105} Gritsch, History, 66.

\textsuperscript{106} Olson, Matthias Flacius, 170.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 169.
entrance, accepted the key to the city, acknowledged the homage of its citizens, pronounced amnesty, and confirmed the city’s rights and freedoms.”

Magdeburg had done what no other city had: resisted and kept its political and religious rights. The rationale behind the resistance is seen in the *Magdeburg Confession*, an important section quoted here: “The powers that be are ordained of God to protect the good and punish the bad (Romans 13), but if they start to persecute the good, they are no longer ordained of God.”

Flacius is here directly applying Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms (or distinction between the two realms). The citizens of Magdeburg have no problem maintaining loyalty to the emperor in secular matters, but they will not tolerate the emperor’s authority in religious matters. Much of the tone and wording in the confession parallels Luther’s own *Warnung an seine lieben Deutschen* (*Warning to His Dear German People*). It is clear here that Flacius follows Luther not only in word but also in deed.

Two of the individual articles in the *Magdeburg Confession* pertain to the discussion her concerning absolution and the universal priesthood—*Von der Absolution* (On absolution) and *Von der Kirche und Kirchendienern und der Gewalt derselben* (On

108 Ibid., 209.

109 “Magistratus est ordinatio Dei, ut sit honori bono operi &t errori malo non est iam in eo, quod ita facit, ordinatio Dei” As quoted in Roland Bainton, *The Age of the Reformation* (Malabar: Krieger, 1984), 172ff. As David Whitford points out there is no accessible German edition of the text. The Latin text can be found in Nicholas von Amsdorf, *Confessio et Apologia Pastorum & reliquorum ministrorum Ecclesiae Magdeburgensis* (Magdeburg, 1550), unpaginated.


the Church and Ministers of the Church and Their Power).\textsuperscript{112} In Von der Absolution, the Magdeburgers follow Luther’s doctrine of confession; namely, that confession should be observed for the forgiveness of sins. They agree that confession and absolution should be done lawfully through a church official.\textsuperscript{113} This would be the responsibility of the office of ministry. The exception would be a case of emergency. We are left to guess what this emergency would be, presumably when a church official is unavailable, not just absent.

An extended quotation is again valuable here.

> Christ in the Gospel has given power to human beings not only to teach about the forgiveness of sins and [God’s] other blessings, but also themselves to distribute these to believers, whether individually or communally, as the case may be. So likewise on the other hand he has also given power not only to teach about the retaining of sins and God’s anger, but also to apply these effectively against those who remain in open sin and vice and who do not desire to abstain from them. And such forgiveness and retention of sin is valid whether it happens lawfully through a minister of the church officer or in time of necessity through another Christian, not only outwardly before the church, but also before God and his judgment.

> Therefore, whoever receives absolution in faith, also receives with it true forgiveness of sins and the Holy Ghost. Absolution also serves on its own to awaken faith in each heart. For the sake of this absolution, which is instituted by Christ, that confession should also be observed which has been instituted by men, not because absolution could not take place without confession or the enumeration of sins or would be worthless, but for other important reasons, especially so that no one receives the sacraments without examination and unworthily.\textsuperscript{114}


\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 47.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 47–48 (translation mine). “Christus hat im Evangelio den Menschen gewalt gegeben nicht allein zu lehren von V ergebung der Sünde und andern seinenWolthaten, sodern auch dieselben selbst auszuteilen den Gläubigen, insonderheit oder insgemein, wie es sich zuträgt; Wie er denn auch dargegen Gewalt gegeben hat niht allein zu lehren von behaltung der Sünden und Gottes Zornes, sondern auch dieselben wirtlich zu üben wider die, so in öffentlichen Sünden und lastern liegen und nicht davon abstehen wollen. Es gilt auch solche Vergebung und behalting der Sünden, wenn sie rechtmästig geschieht durch die kirchendiener oder zur Zeit der not durch andre Christen, nicht allein äusserlich vor der kirch, sondern auch vor Gott und seiner Gerischt. “Derhalben, wer die absolution mit dem Glauben empfähet, der empfähet damit auch wahrhaftiglich Vergebung der Sünde und den h. Geist. Es dienet auch die absolution
He affirms that the keys have been given not only to Peter, all the apostles, and their successors but also to all believers. It is also interesting to read his explanation of absolution. Absolution awakens faith in each heart and was instituted by Christ alone. Absolution is not dependent on confession, but confession has value other than absolution. This echoes Luther above on the many values of confession (didactic, etc).

Martin Chemnitz

Martin Chemnitz spent time studying at Wittenberg with Melanchthon and had been exposed to Luther.¹¹⁵ While at Wittenberg, Chemnitz lectured on Melanchthon’s *Loci* as well. His Lutheran pedigree was secured when Bugenhagen entrusted to him the continuing development of the reform in the city of Brunswick, where he had started it. Bugenhagen ordained Chemnitz in 1554.¹¹⁶ He was later appointed as superintendent, allowing him to extend the influence of the Reformation through ordination, expansion of Christian schools, and the relationship between pastors and the city council.¹¹⁷

Writings

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¹¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 57.
Chemnitz contributed several key writings to the expansion and solidification of Lutheranism in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. He published his *Enchiridion* in 1569. The *Enchiridion* was intended “to be used in the preparation of the clergy for examinations conducted by the superintendent twice each year and for the examination of candidates for ordination.”\(^{118}\) His other influential writings were published posthumously by Polycarp Leyser: *Loci Theologici* (1591), *Harmonia Evangelica* (1593), *Examen concilii Tridentini*, and *Postilla* (1594). For the purposes of this essay, three of his more influential writings will be examined: his *Enchiridion, Loci Theologici*, and *Postilla*, and *Examen concilii Tridentini*.

The Enchiridion

The *Enchiridion* was created for the training of pastors and serves as a great source of Chemnitz’s influence on the developing confessional consciousness of the Lutheran church. It is set up in a typical question-and-answer fashion explaining how to think and approach each topic. Three areas are of interest to this study: his comments on the keys, private absolution, and the role of ministers/laypeople in the church.

Chemnitz is consistent on the possession and use of the keys. The ability to bind and loose sins is the property of the whole church and is not limited to Peter or to priests.\(^{119}\) The exercising of the keys is one of the four tasks assigned to the office.\(^{120}\) The role of the universal priesthood is severely limited for Chemnitz:

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 60.


\(^{120}\) Ibid., 126.
What then is private absolution? When a minister of the church, or in case of necessity, any Christian, sets forth the comfort of the Gospel not in general, but proclaims forgiveness of sins on the basis of the Word of God privately in particular to a sinner who seeks the grace of God in Christ in earnest repentance and true faith, so that he absolves him of his sins in the name of Christ and pronounces him forgiven; Christ has promised to be present with His spirit in this act.\[121\]

Laypeople can exercise the keys, but only in “cases of necessity.” The question then is this: what is the role of the universal priesthood? Chemnitz explains in his *Enchiridion*, “But all believers are called to be priests. Have all, therefore, a general call to ministry? All Christians are priests, not that all should function without difference in the ministry of the word and Sacraments, without a special call, but they should offer spiritual sacrifices (Romans 12; Hebrews 13).”\[122\]

There is one instance where laypeople are allowed to exercise their priestly responsibilities—in their households with their families.

Yet all Christians have a general call to proclaim the virtues of God and especially family heads, to instruct their households. It is true that all Christians have a general call to proclaim the Gospel of God (Romans 10:9), to speak the Word of God among themselves (Eph 5:19) and to admonish each other from the Word of God (CL 3:16), to reprove (Eph 5:11), and comfort (1 Thess. 4:18). And family heads are enjoined to do this with the special command that they give their

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121 Ibid. 134 “Wenn ein verordner Diener der Kirchen aber im fall der Roht ein geminer Christ den trost des Evangelii nicht in Gemein oder in hauffen verfünstiget sondern wenn er insonderheit einen armen Sünder der in rechter buß durch wahren Glauben Gotes Gnade in Christo sucht unnd begeret. Vergebung der Sünden. Verfünstiget also daß er ihn von seinen Sünden los spricht und ledig zehlet in namen Christi in welcher handlung Christus selber mit seinem Geist aegenwertig senn wil.”

122 Ibid., 29 “Sennd doch alle Glaubige Priester So haben sie ja auch alle einen gemeinen Beruff zum Predigmpt? Wir sin wol alle Geistlich Priester aber nicht alle Prediger den Paulus schreibet ausdrücklich sie sind nicht alle Apostel niche all Propheten, nicht alle Lehrer konnten nicht alle außegen sondern Gott fert etliche zu postein etliche zu Propheten etlich zu Evangelisten etliche zu hirten und Lehrer dardurch der leib Christi erbamet werde. 1 Cor 12. Ephes. 4 Und Petrus erklärt sich sein nicht daß wir alle ohn Beruff deß Predigmpts uns anmassen sollen sondern wir find alle Priester daß wir Geistliche Opfer opffern sollen/Rom. 12 Heb. 13.”
households the instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). But the public ministry of the Word and of the Sacraments of the church is not entrusted to all Christians in general, as we have already shown (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:12), for a special or particular call is required for this (Romans 10:5). 123

Here again we see the distinction between public (those functioning as the representative of the church) and private (individual and their families) teaching of the word of God, to “reprove and comfort.”

Loci Theologici

The Loci is a much more expansive writing than the Enchiridion. Much like Melanchthon’s Loci, it covers many topics, from the “exposition of the decalog” to “the cause of sin an concerning contingency” to “the unity of the divine essence.” Chemnitz also dedicates much space and time to a discussion of the church (Locus XVII). The section is split up into four sections: “The Terminology,” “Question: Is There a Church,” “Definition of the Church,” and last, and most applicable for us here, “Teachers and Hearers in the Church.” Here he draws a sharp distinction between those who can teach in the church, how they are called, and the role of laypeople in ministry.

A teacher is allowed to teach the word of God publicly. They have to meet five criteria. First, this person must have a call. This call is not just a personal call from God, but must be affirmed by a body of believers.124 Second, the person must have the skill

123 Ibid. “Es haben aber all Christen einen gemeinen Beruff und Befehl gottes wort (illegible) bekennen (Rom. 10) davon unter andern zu reden (Eph. 5) einer den ander aus Gottes Wort iuvermanen (Heb. 5) zu strassen (Eph. 5; Matt. 18) zu trösten (1 Thess 4) und sonderlich ist im hausregiment die zucht und Bermahnung zu der Herr befohlen (1 Cor 12; Eph 4). Aber das öffentliche predigampt des Worts und der Sacramenten ist nicht Gemein allen Christen befohlen (1 Cor. 12; Eph 4) sondern dazu gehöret und ist von nöten ein sonderlicher Beruff (Rom. 10).

124 Martin Chemnitz, Loci Theologici. Translated by J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989),
and the ability to teach the word of God. Third, he must have a “faithfulness or constancy in teaching over and against the wolves.”

Chemnitz does not identify “the wolves” here, but presumably he is referring those who would oppose the truth of the Gospel as he understands it (Roman Catholics and Anabaptist perhaps). Fourth, he must exhibit the presence of spiritual gifts, governance and protection in particular: “Very many spiritual gifts (are needed), but particularly divine governance and protection, are required so that the ministry may be carried out rightly and for the edification of the church.”

Fifth, he must demonstrate what Chemnitz refers to as “piety of life.” He is to be an example to the flock, “in life, in character, in faith, in purity.” The ministers are also in charge of exercising the power of the keys in the community, as they are in charge of the proclamation of the word.

Chemnitz stays true to his writings in the Enchiridion that the role of the universal priesthood is limited to one’s household:

This is indeed a general call, common to all Christians, to speak among themselves about the Word of God and to comfort one another with the Word of God, and to confess the Gospel, and this is enjoined on the heads of households by individual command. But to administer those things which pertain to the public ministry of the Word and the sacraments is not commanded to all Christians in general as the two passages from 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 cited above, teach clearly enough. Nor does the general calling which all receive in Baptism

699.

125 Ibid., 698.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
128 Referring to 1 Pet. 5:3.
129 Ibid., 697.
suffice to give a person the office of ministry, but there is required a special call, as has been shown in the preceding testimonies, cf. James 3:1.  

Chemnitz’s is concerned to distinguish between public and private ministry, with emphasis on the proper application of public ministry. He has very little to say on the role of the universal priesthood in the church.

Postilla oder Auszlegung

Chemnitz’s penned the Postilla in 1594, and it contains, among other things, his Quasimodogeniti sermons. Much like the other Lutheran Orthodox theologians that will be studied here, information on the universal priesthood and confession is sparse at best. Chemnitz chooses to focus instead on the office of ministry. One fact does come out, however: Chemnitz believes that the office of ministry is the realm where loosing and binding takes place.  

As with the others, there is no reference to the universal priesthood.

The Examen concilii Tridentini was written in response to the decisions made at the Council of Trent. Chemnitz dealt with the council’s writing topic by topic, section by section. Two of the more important sections for my study are the study on the character of the priests and the section on absolution, both will be sampled here.

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130 Ibid. 698–99. “Respondeo. Haec quidem generalis vocation omnibus Christianis communis est, ut de verbo Dei inter se loquantur, Eph.5 v. 19 & consolentur se in vicem verbo Dei 1 Thessal. 4 v.38. Evangelium confiteantur, Romanor. 10, v. 9 & patribusfam. Singulari mandato hoc inunctum est. Sed ea, quae ad publicum ministerium verbi & sacramentorum pertinent administrare, non est in genere omnibus Christianis mandatum. Sicut duo illa loca 1 Corinth. 12 & Ephes. 4 superius citatasatis dilucide docent. Nec suscicit ad ministerium generalis vocatio, quam omnes fideles in Baptismo accipiunt, sed requiriur peculiaris vocatio, sicut in praecedentibus ostensum est, Iac. 3 v. 1 Nolite plures fieri Magistri, vel Doctores, scientes, quoniam majus judicium sumitis.”

Canon IX of Trent affirmed that baptism, confirmation, and ordination left an indelible mark on the character of those who went through it. In effect, this was supporting the *character indebilis* that Luther and other who came after him rejected. Chemnitz rejects this out of hand in part 2, 1st topic, section 7. He makes several points in attempting to disprove the doctrine. First, it had no basis in Scripture. Second, it was true that baptism was not to be repeated. This lack of repetition didn’t have to do with character but with divine institution – that is how it was designed.

Absolution was another important subject to this study that Chemnitz dealt with. Here Chemnitz was specifically arguing with Chapter Six and Canon IX and X. The section is broken up into two parts. The first is about the nature of the priest in the role of absolution and the second is the definition of absolution itself. Trent affirms that the priest has not only a pastoral role, but a judicial role as one as well. Second, that priests are the only ones who are able to “bind and loose” sins (even if priests are in mortal sin).

Starting with the priests first, Chemnitz insisted that the act of absolution was not merely a juridical one. The act of absolution was the application of the proclamation of the Gospel. The priest didn’t just declare guilt or innocence; he applied the word of God to the penitent. It was more than merely a legal act for Chemnitz. He also disagreed

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132 Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*. Translated by Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1978), 90.

133 Ibid., 92.

134 Ibid., 620.

135 Ibid., 621.
with the idea that the keys were merely given to priests alone. This leads him into his discussion of the nature of absolution.

Absolution was rightly the practiced by the office of ministry, but in matters of emergency lay people could perform absolution (Chemnitz points out this is exactly what Luther said). Absolution was the application and proclamation of the Gospel. Chemnitz believed that through this process faith is strengthened. Faith is strengthened because it is not based on our works but the works of Christ on our behalf. This position left out any concern of contrition or attrition, the confessor was not the judge of whether someone was worthy or not. Further, the spiritual status of the confessor was irrelevant. The word of God did it all, the confessor was merely there to express what God was already saying.

In the Examine Chemnitz rejects four hundred years of Roman Catholic theology as he promotes and concretizes Lutheran theology. Chemnitz emphasizes the important role of absolution, but the role of the universal priesthood is absent here. The layperson is still only allowed to provide absolution in cases of emergency. This is not in line with what Luther had intended.

David Chytraeus

Chytraeus is both an inheritor of and major contributor to the expansion of Lutheran theology. As a student at Wittenberg, he studied under both Luther and

136 Ibid., 622.
137 Ibid., 623.
Melanchthon.\textsuperscript{138} Like others, Chytraeus lectured on Melanchthon’s \textit{Loci} in 1548.\textsuperscript{139} His fidelity to Lutheran theology led to an international contribution. Elector Augustus of Saxony called together seventeen Lutheran theologians in 1576 to propose a doctrinal statement that could be submitted to all Lutheran princes for approval. David Chytraeus was one of those selected to contribute to what would become the \textit{Formula of Concord}.\textsuperscript{140} Chytraeus’s influence on the \textit{Formula} was huge. He was one of the main contributors/authors of article 7, “The Lord’s Supper.”\textsuperscript{141} His writings also include a history of the Augsburg Confession, published in 1571.

\textit{De Sacrificiis (On Sacrifice)}

\textit{De Sacrificiis} was first published in 1569 as an introduction to his commentary on Leviticus. Chytraeus provides a study of the biblical concept of sacrifice, beginning with the OT sacrifices and continuing on to Christ’s sacrifice. The study wraps up with an explanation of the sacrifice that takes place in the Lord’s Supper. As John Warwick Montgomery points out, this document is of particular significance to understanding Chytraeus for three reasons. First, it is a work of biblical theology that was central to his work as a theologian. Second, it is a product of his university lectures and reflects his

\textsuperscript{138} David Chytraeus, \textit{On Sacrifice}. Translated by John Warwick Montgomery (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), 12.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 22.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 24.
classroom teachings. Third, the work pertains directly to his work in the Formula of Concord, article 7, on the Lord’s Supper in particular.\footnote{Ibid.}

Of particular interest to this study is the twelve pages dedicated to his explanation of the priesthood of all believers. Chytraeus shows his fidelity to Luther on this doctrine, vigorously affirming that all baptized Christians are priests:

The testimonies which I am about to give will show clearly that the New Testament priesthood and sacrifices are common to all Christians; that in the New Testament there is no ceremonial or visible priesthood in the hands of a particular order and distinct from the priesthood of the people; and that priests are not now created or ordained by men but are born of God through His Word and Baptism, and that therefore all Christians have equal priestly dignity and the same right to carry out sacerdotal functions before God and offer the sacrifices which He has commanded.\footnote{Ibid. 89–90. “Quod autem hoc Sacerdotium & Sacrificia Novi Testamenti, communia sint omnium Christianorum: nec ullum sit in Novo Testamento Sacerdotium ceremoniale seu uisibile, certi ordinis proprium & a populi Sacerdotio diversum: quoque; Sacerdotes non ab hominibus creentur aut ordinentur, sed ex Deo per verbum & baptismum nascantur: ideoque; omnes Christiani parem sacerdotii honorem & idem ius officia sacerdotalia coram Deo obeundi, & sacrificia a Deo mandata offerendi.”}

Chytraeus addresses many of the same passages that Luther used in his study, such as 1 Peter 2:9.

The next section is titled “The Privileges and Responsibilities of Christian Priests.” Here Chytraeus runs through the six functions of the priesthood and how these are applicable to all Christians: “The universality of this priesthood is also shown by the characteristic functions of these priests, which are: to offer sacrifices to God; to approach Him, i.e. to pray for oneself and others; to confess and teach God’s word; to pass
judgment on all doctrines and spirits; to baptize and administer the Eucharist; to bind and loose sins.”

These are the same responsibilities as those from Luther’s *De instituendis ministris Ecclesiae* from 1523, listed previously here in chapter 2. Chytraeus only provides one sentence addressing the issues of binding and loosing and sins: “Fifth, as Christ asserts in a lengthy saying, Matt. 18:15-18, all Christians alike have the keys, or power to bind and loose sins, i.e., to declare sins remitted or retained.”

The New Testament priesthood is universal: “Now although the New Testament priesthood is universal, no one in the public assembly of the church should appropriate or discharge on his own authority this right which is the common property of all.”

Chytraeus addresses the issue of the professional ministry. He emphasizes that the “public execution” of the priestly offices should be done by those who are “qualified”:

For necessary to the public execution of the priestly office of instructing, consoling, exhorting, denouncing, sins, judging controversies over doctrine, etc, is a thorough knowledge of Christian theology, a faculty for teaching, skill in languages, speaking ability, and other gifts, and these are not equally manifest in all whom the Holy Spirit has regenerated; therefore those who lack these talents rightly yield their privileges to others better endowed than themselves.

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144 Ibid. 95. “Seu nomen ac ius Sacerdotum tribuere manifestum est. Deinde, idem demonstrant officia sacerdotii propria qua sunt offerre Deo sacrificia, Accedere ad Deum seu orare pro se & alii, Docere & confiteri Verbum Dei, iudicare de omnibus doctrinis & spiritibus, baptisare, eucharistiam ministrare, ligare, & solvere peccata.

145 Ibid. 97. “Quinto, claves seu potestatem ligandi & solvendi peccata, seu peccatorum retentionem & remissionem annunciandi, omnium Christianorum commune esse, prolixa concione Christus Matthew 18 declarat.”

146 Ibid. 98: “Cum autem Sacerdotii omnibus commune sit, nemo in publico coetu ecclesiae ius omnibus commune, sibi soli arripere & exequi debet.”

147 Ibid. “Nam ad publicam officii sacerdotialis executionem in docendo, consolando, exhortando, arguendis peccatis, dijudicandis dogmatum controversiis & solida congnito doctrinae Christianae, facultas
So like Luther, Chytraeus affirms the universal priesthood. Unlike Luther he believes that the public execution of these tasks is reserved for the office of ministry. Those who occupy the office of ministry must be prepared and qualified. What Chytraeus does not allow for here is the ability for Christians to provide absolution for each other—they are not qualified and do not have enough education or training. Chytraeus’s statements exclude the possibility and do not simply qualify a possibility.

Chytraeus does not leave much of relevance to absolution and the universal priesthood in his *Quasimodogeniti* sermons. He preaches on these Sundays, but never covers the John 20 passage.  

Aegidius Hunnius

Aegidius (Giles) Hunnius was a part of the “glorious reign of orthodoxy” at the University of Wittenberg in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His writings encompassed biblical commentary, sermons, and theological commentary on the articles of faith, particularly from the *Confessio Augustana*. He was greatly respected by his successors because of his compendious commentaries on the Gospels and almost all of

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148 David Chytraeus, *A postil or orderly disposing of certeine epistles vsually red in the Church of God, vppon the Sundaeyes and holydayes throughout the whole yeere*. Translated by Arthur Golding, 1658. While this is a collection of epistles for the church year. I wanted to investigate and see if the John 20 passage was dealt with on *Quasimodogeniti* Sunday, but it was not. What’s interesting is that he chose epistles and ignored the passages altogether. I have been unable to find another commentary in which Chytraeus deals with the John 20 passage.

the Epistles. His influence is apparent in the many quotations from his works in later Lutheran writings. Several of these writings will be examined here.

Commentary on Confessio Augustana: De Ecclesia

Hunnius continues in the tradition of Lutheran Orthodoxy by providing commentary on the defining document of Lutheranism, the Confessio Augustana. A key passage is articles 7 and 8, on the church. Commenting on the articles, Hunnius gives a definition of the church:

The Apostle has embraced all these things, when/since the Church represents/describes the unity/togetherness and that mutual sharing of the saints. Seek to serve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. [There is] one body, one Spirit (in the manner that you all are also called in your hope of the calling), one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and father of all. 150

This definition of the church can be summed up with five key elements that must be in place: visibility, defined community calling, preaching/teaching of the word, proper application of the sacraments, and one pastor called by Christ. Hunnius does not elaborate on each of these elements. He simply states that they need to be present to have a true church.

Hunnius does not address the two articles (11 and 12) on confession and repentance. He is silent on the issue, intimating that he accepts the standard Orthodox position on the importance of confession. He continues in the line of the rest of the Lutheran Orthodox theologians on the subject of the universal priesthood, confession,

150 Aegidius Hunnius, Disputation XII. Ex septimo articulo augustana confessionis: ad catus subjectas theses, dei clementer adiuvante gratia (Wittenberg: Mattaeus Welack, 1595), unpaginated: “Haec omnia complexus est Apstolus, cum Ecclesia unitatem et sanctorum communionem illam describens sit: studete servare unitatem spiritus per vinculum pacis. Unum corpus, unus Spiritus, quemadmodum et vocati estis in spe vocationis vestra Unus Dominus et una fides, unum baptisma et unus Deus et pater omnium.”
and absolution. He acknowledges that the universal priesthood exists but merely using it to show the error of Rome’s ways.\textsuperscript{151} Neither the doctrine nor its implication for the church thus receives any positive development.

\textit{Sermons and Commentaries on Scripture}

Several of Hunnius’s sermon collections are available, though none in English. Most of the collections follow the Lutheran liturgical year, with some special collections for special occasions. Discussion about the universal priesthood, confession, absolution, or the keys is very hard to find. What is present in his sermons, particularly the collection focused on here, is the importance of justification.\textsuperscript{152}

\textit{Zwo Christliche Predigten . . .}

One significant collection is \textit{Zwo Christliche Predigten, in Welchen Die Artikel von der Person Christi, seiner Himmelfahrt, und sitzen zur rechten Gottes, aus Heiliger Schrift wederam Die Eine am Fest der Himmelfahrt Christi: Die Ander am Tage der Heimsuchung Mariae}, Hunnius emphasizes over and over the importance of understanding the importance of Christ’s death. Like Luther, Hunnius sees in Christ’s death the justification needed for all humans to be reconciled to God. It is this justification for Luther, and presumably for Hunnius, that allows all equally to take part in the salvation and life of the church.\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{152} The importance of this will be seen below in chapter 6 on Philip Spener.

\textsuperscript{153} \textit{Zwo Christliche Predigten, In Welchen Die Artikel von der Person Christi, seiner}
1 Peter 2:9

Hunnius gives a summary in his commentary on 1 Peter 2:9: “For each of them is a king, there is a holding power over the world, and the devil; each of the; priests, each of them is anointed in the Spirit so that they offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable by God through Jesus Christ.”

Hunnius spends some time developing a doctrine of the universal priesthood here; he is not merely affirms the words of Peter. The sense here is the each baptized believer has more power than Peter did. A few pages later he elaborates on the doctrine a bit, but only in the context of rejecting Rome’s position on the power within the Roman priesthood.

Matthew 18:18

Another important passage is Matthew 18:18. In his analysis of this passage, Hunnius gives a simple layout of the meaning,

To a man unrepentant, Christ teaches that this proclaimed sentence of the Church will not invalid before God, but will be especially valid and efficacious, and this he confirms by a serious and religious witness, subjecting himself. To bind is to retain sins and to hand over a man by the sentence of excommunication to a temporal punishment and unless there is repentance to an eternal punishment of God’s wrath. Moreover to release is to absolve from sins. It is therefore in the sense of Christ’s affirmation that, if in the name of the Church God’s anger and eternal damnation is proclaimed to an impenitent person, this will be valid in the heavens before God himself. But, if the Evangelical absolution from sins is

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155 Ibid., 30.
announced to a person who has seen the light and is a believer, this will be valid without question and accompanied by a certain effect.\textsuperscript{156}  

First, once sins are remitted, they are remitted for good. The promise of forgiveness cannot be rescinded by the power of the church, or here more particularly, the papacy.\textsuperscript{157}  

Second, the power is not given only to the Roman Church via Peter. This power is given to all ministers: “For this he has promised his holy word, it is his will to regard the absolution pronounced legitimately by the ecclesiastical ministry as valid in every respect.”\textsuperscript{158} He uses the passage as an opportunity, much like in 1 Peter above, to attack the abuse of power in Rome.  

John 20:23  

Hunnius’s explanation here is much the same as it is in Matthew 18:18. He gives a definition of the keys, describes its power, and explains how it is available to all, not just the papacy: “The ordinary power of the keys was not given to Peter alone, but as John expressly testifies here to all apostles.”\textsuperscript{159} He refers then to Matthew 18:18 as further proof of this truth.

\textsuperscript{156} Hunnius, \textit{Celeberrimi}, 220: “Sententiam istam Ecclesiae denuntiatam homini impoenitenti docet Christus non fore coram deo irritam, sed maxime ratam et efficacem, idque gravi et religiosa attestatione confirmat, subjiciens. Alligare est peccata retinere et excomjunicationis sententia hominem irae Dei, ac temporalibus, ac nisi poenitentia fiat, aeternis quoque poenis addicere. Solvere porro est, a peccatis absolvere. Est ergo sensu asseverationis Christi: si nomine Ecclesiae denuntietur impenitenti ira Dei et aeterna damnatio, fore id ratum in coelis coram ipso Deo. Rursum, si resipiscenti et credenti annuntietur Evangelica a peccatis absolutis, fore et hanc indubie ratam et cum solido effectu conjunctam.”  

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 222.  

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.“Sic enim in verbo suo sancta promisit, velle se absolutionem, ab Ecclesiastio ministerio legitime pronunciatam, modis omnibus habere ratam.”  

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 985. “Quemadmodum etiam ordinaria potestas clavium non soli Petro data est, sed, quemadmodum expresse hic testator Johannes, omnibus Apostolis.
Johann Gerhard

Gerhard’s contributions to Lutheranism are as wide-ranging as they are deep. Gerhard was a Lutheran theologian at Jena for over twenty years. He is held in high regard alongside Luther and Chemnitz as one of the three most important Lutherans.¹⁶⁰ His writings range from church orders, to devotional literature, to expansive theological treatises. Three distinctive elements can be seen in Gerhard’s writing: first, his dependence on and use of Aristotelianism and its subsequent rebirth in Lutheranism in the seventeenth century;¹⁶¹ second, his emphasis on pure doctrine, both in definition and use;¹⁶² and, third, his emphasis on a deep evangelical piety.¹⁶³ This study will focus on four of Gerhard’s writings. Each will help reveal Gerhard’s stance on both absolution and the universal priesthood.

*Meditationes Sacrae (“Sacred Meditations”) (1606)*

*SM* is divided into fifty-one meditations with the goal to promote true Godliness and promote spirituality.¹⁶⁴ Gerhard makes it clear that the reason for the devotional is to...
help the reader increase in piety, much in the same way that Anselm and Tauler did with their writings.\textsuperscript{165}

The universal priesthood is completely absent. However, repentance, contrition, and confession are covered, with an emphasis on true sorrow. He considers true sorrow and contrition to be the foundation of a holy life:

Therefore where there is true penitence there is eternal life. And hence where there is no true penitence there is neither forgiveness of sins, nor the grace of God, nor Christ, nor His merit, nor satisfaction for sin, nor justification, nor peace of conscience, nor the Holy Spirit, nor the blessed Trinity, nor eternal life. . . . Christ’s satisfaction is of no effect but in the heart of the truly contrite.\textsuperscript{166}

Contrition is a necessary part of true penance: “God does not pour the oil of His mercy except into the vessel of a truly contrite heart.”\textsuperscript{167} In order to have a truly contrite heart, one needs to have sorrow for all of his or her sins, as Christ only forgives those sins that are uncovered: “God does not bind up thy wounds, until thou acknowledge and deplore thy sin. God does not cover thine iniquities, until thou first uncover them in humble penitence.”\textsuperscript{168}

Interpreting Gerhard is difficult here. He is arguing for some sort of enumeration of sins, perhaps not complete, but an enumeration nonetheless. A clue to the delimiter of

\begin{tabular}{l}
165 Preus, \textit{Theology}, 53. \\
166 Ibid., 21–22. “Ergo ubi vera poenitentia ibi vita aeterna. Ubi vera poenitentia non est, ibi nec peccatorum remissio, nec Dei gratia, nec Christus, nec ipsius meritum, nec pro peccatis satisfactio, nec justitia, nec tranquilla conscientia, nec Spiritus sanctus, nec sancta Trinitas, nec vita aeterna. . . . Non habet locum Christi satisfaction, nisi in corde vere contrito.” \\
167 Ibid., 25. “Non effundit Deus misericordiae oleum, nisi in vas probe contritum.” \\
168 Ibid., 26. “Non alligat Deus vulnera tua, nisi prius illa agnoscas et deplores; non tegit Deus , nisi prius detegas.
\end{tabular}
the enumeration of sins may lie in his emphasis on the conscience. He spends quite a bit of time emphasizing its importance for one’s spiritual life:

A quiet conscience is the very beginning of eternal life; thou wilt more truly rejoin in the hardships of life with a good conscience than amidst all its pleasures with a guilty one. Against all the malice of wicked men thou canst appeal to a conscience void of offence. Question thyself closely concerning thyself, because thou knowest thyself far better than any one else knows thee.\(^{169}\)

So perhaps Gerhard means that the enumeration of sins is necessary to the extent that one can gain a clear conscience but does not expect believers to completely enumerate their sins. Either way, Gerhard is espousing a view that is quite a bit different from Luther’s.

*Scholas Pietatis (“School of Piety”) (1623)*

*SP* is a five-volume collection of writings with the goal of “train[ing] yourself in godliness.”\(^{170}\) There is no trace of the universal priesthood or its relationship with confession and absolution. Rather, Gerhard emphasizes that confession is key for the development of godliness, especially relative to the reception of the Lord’s Supper.\(^{171}\) Here he is less emphatic about the depth of contrition and the enumeration of sins. What is necessary here is some contrition or sorrow: “Who does not from God’s Law confess their sins, nor bear *any* contrition or sorrow over their sin.”\(^{172}\)

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169 Ibid., 190. “Tranquillitas conscientiae initium est vitae aeternae; verius et jucundius gaudebis de bona conscientia inter angustias, quam de mala inter delicias; contr omnem malevolentorum obtrectationem confidenter obvertere poteris conscientiae excuseationem. Te interroga de te, quia te longe nosti melius, quam ullos homo alius.”


171 Ibid., 114–15.

172 Ibid. “Welche ihre Sunde aus Gottes Gesetz nicht erkennen, noch daruber Reu und Leid tragen.”
Gerhard wrote *DEP*, along with *SM*, to turn individuals’ hearts toward true piety and to promote the growth of the inner man. The *DEP* is split up into four parts:

“Concerning Meditation on Sins,” “Concerning Contemplation of Divine Gifts Bestowed,” “Concerning Meditation On Our Needs,” and “Meditation on the Need of the Neighbor.” Each part has prayers or thanksgiving relative to the subject of the section.

The first section of chapter 6 (“Our Frequent Participation in the Sins of Others”) lays out the responsibility that all Christians have in their neighbors’ salvation: “O holy God, just Judge, you have committed me not only the care of my own soul, but also the care of my neighbor’s.” He further points out that he (and also inferring others) does not sufficiently aid others in their salvation and development of godliness: “But how often my carelessness causes great detriment to my neighbor’s piety! How often I fail to frankly and forthrightly rebuke him in his sin! How often I accuse him less forthrightly of his fault, held back because of fear or because I desire his favor.” Gerhard is concerned about a Christian’s *failure* to point out sin in a neighbor’s life, not for consoling, but for conviction! There is a greater concern for piety here than for communicating God’s grace. He goes on to talk about the importance of praying for a neighbor’s salvation:

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174 Ibid., 21 “Sancte Deus, juste judex, comisisti mihi non solum meae animae, sed & proximi curam.”

175 Ibid., 22. “At quoties proximus mea negligentia magnam facit pietatis jaeturam! Quoties eum in peccatis haud satis libere & confidenter increpo! Quoties vel metu vel favore retractus minus libere ipsius delicta arguo!”
We pray for ourselves all the time, but we are always concerned with ourselves. But to ask God for the salvation of a neighbor is a work of love. So when I do not pray for the salvation of my neighbor I condemn myself by a violation of the law of love. My neighbor dies a spiritual death and I mourn and groan day and night, though physical death brings no harm to the godly man, but rather provides a transition to the heavenly fatherland. My neighbor dies a spiritual death by committing mortal sins, and I watch him die without concern.\footnote{Ibid. \textit{Pro seipso orare, est necessitates at pro salute proximi rogare, caritatis. Quoties igitur preces pro salute proximi neglego, toties violati dilectionis mandati me ipsum damno. Moritur proximus corporis morte, & ecce luctu ac genmitibus Omnio compleo: cum tamen mors corporis nullum afferat pio homini nocumentum: sed potius ad coelestem patriam praebeat tranfitum. Moritur proximus animae morte, peccata mortalia perpetrando, & ecce securo animo ipsum mori video, nec ulla ratione video.}}

Gerhard’s concern for others’ sins is primarily to be about his own sin of participating in it rather than his concern to help them refrain from sin, which is present, but not primary. Secondarily, in all one can do for one’s neighbor, the act of hearing his or her sin and pronouncing forgiveness is not a part of it. The concern is to make the neighbor aware of his or her sin that will presumably lead to contrition and repentance. Consolation, grace, and absolution are absent here. The role of the neighbor is merely to point out another’s sin and leave it to him or her to make it right with God. Luther’s emphasis on the consolation of God’s grace and the help of the neighbor is not present here.

\textit{Loci Theologici (Points of Theology)} (1610–1622)

The \textit{Loci Theologici} is an extensive, multivolume work in which Gerhard covers major topics of theology and philosophy.\footnote{Preus gives and excellent summary of the theological and philosophical significance of Gerhard’s \textit{Loci} for the development of Lutheranism, 107ff.} Several loci specifically address absolution and the universal priesthood.

The first significant \textit{Loci} is \textit{De Poenitentia}. Here Gerhard assumes the practice of confession but does not affirm or emphasize its value. He spends most of his time giving
direction as to how properly to engage in confession and how to understand it theologically. Much of Gerhard’s discussion of penance is framed by his rejection (based on Luther’s) of the Novatian heresy.\footnote{178 Gerhard, \textit{Locorum Theologicorum Cum Pro Adstruenda Veritate, Tum Pro Destruenda quorumvis contradicentium falsitatem per Theses nervose, solidè & copiosè explicatorum Tomus} (Jenae: Steinmann, 1614), 6:204ff.}

Gerhard does not even discuss the possibility of lay absolution. True and fair forgiveness of sins comes only from a priest, and the power of the priest (office of ministry) comes directly from God.\footnote{179 Ibid., 216.} The power of remittance is not dependent on the qualifications of the priest, other than the qualification of having a proper call (\textit{vocatio}).\footnote{180 Ibid., 220.} The only relationship that confession does have with the neighbor is private confession, which you give to your neighbor when you have wronged him or her. There is no possibility mentioned of a neighbor’s speaking words of absolution.\footnote{181 Ibid., 228.} Gerhard does not deny it out of hand, he simply ignores it.

Gerhard gives much more space to the office of ministry and its relationship to the universal priesthood in \textit{Locus XXIII—De Ministerio Ecclesiastica}. He makes it clear that there is an office of ministry that is responsible for handling the public affairs of the church. A person called to the public office is confirmed by his giftedness to teach, and one of his primary responsibilities is the binding and loosing of sins.\footnote{182 Johann Gerhard, \textit{On the Ministry and Role of the Laity: Selected Section of the Locus XXIII, On the Ecclesiastical Ministry}. Translated by Martin Jackson (Malone: Repristination, 1997), 6.} The presence of the keys in the church (\textit{ecclesia}) is evidence that the church has the right and expectation
to call ministers to use the keys.\textsuperscript{183} The keys belong to the whole church, but Gerhard limits their use to the office of ministry. As they were given to Peter, who was anointed by Christ for the office of ministry, now they are handed down only to those who hold the same office as Peter.\textsuperscript{184}

How does Gerhard answer the question of whether the power of the keys has been given to the whole church? Interestingly, he takes a stance Luther completely rejected: he separates the \textit{power} of the keys from the \textit{execution} of the power. The power of the keys has been given to the whole church, but the right of execution has only been given to the office of ministry.\textsuperscript{185} Gerhard goes so far as to say that anyone who takes onto themselves the administration and use of the keys, except in the case of necessity, “invades an office that does not belong to him (\textit{alienum invadit officum}).” Unfortunately he does not define what a case of necessity is. This position is consistent with his understanding of the administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper).\textsuperscript{186} Gerhard looks back to the Israelites to point out that it was the right of the priests and the Sanhedrin to excommunicate. This then carried over to the early church and the right of priests and bishops to excommunicate.

Gerhard recognizes the use of 1 Peter 2:9 as a source that refers to all Christians as a “royal priesthood,” but he gives equal value to Revelation 5:9–10: “You redeemed us for God and made us kings and priests for our God.” He argues:

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 8.
\item \textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 13.
\item \textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 6.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Just as from (the fact that) believers are spoken of as kings, this does not mean that they are able to function in the office of a magistrate without a call since the apostles are speaking of spiritual kings, so also from the fact that believers are called priests it cannot be concluded that any one at all of them can function in the ecclesiastical ministry without a call, since the passage likewise is about spiritual priests.\(^\text{187}\)

Gerhard also uses 1 Corinthians 12:29 as further scriptural evidence that the church should not be making “shepherds out of sheep.”\(^\text{188}\)

So then what is the role of laypeople in Gerhard’s thought? First, they have the right to vote on their pastor.\(^\text{189}\) Even in this, Gerhard points out that a popular vote is not all that is needed, because sometimes laypeople can make mistakes.\(^\text{190}\) Another is inquiring and discerning heresies from orthodoxy.\(^\text{191}\) The ability to know false from true teachers is a general call pertaining to all Christians.\(^\text{192}\) A last responsibility for every Christian is the development of their own piety and the encouragement of the development of their neighbor’s piety: “They should confess by the same words and deeds; that they privately establish true piety in their households; that they care that ‘the word of Christ dwell abundantly among them, mutually teaching each other and together

\(^{187}\) Ibid., 4: “Quemadmodum ex eo, quod credentes dicuntur reges, nequaquam colligi potest, quemlibet ipsorum absque vocacione magistratus officio fungi posse, cum de regibus spirituabilis apostoli loquantur; ita nec ex eo, quod credentes dicuntur sacerdotes, colligi potest, quemlibet ipsorum absque vocacione ministerio ecclesiastico fungi posse, cum itidem de spiritualibus sacerdotibus sermo sit.”

\(^{188}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{189}\) Ibid., 25.

\(^{190}\) Ibid.

\(^{191}\) This is much like the responsibility that the universal priesthood has to judge doctrines and spirits. See chap. 2, above.

\(^{192}\) Ibid., 21.
singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” Gerhard does not develop this responsibility further, so it is unclear how far one should go in establishing piety in one’s household and with one’s neighbor as seen in the Daily Exercise above.

Johann Arndt

Among the meager contributions of Lutheran Orthodoxy on the universal priesthood, Johann Arndt provides a plethora of content. Arndt is an especially important figure for two reasons. He provides the most developed understanding of confession in the sixteenth century. Second, he provides a critical link between Luther and Spener on the importance of confession and repentance, despite their differences on the topics. After a brief biographical sketch, the study will briefly examine Arndt’s contributions. Arndt makes important contributions to my study, but these contributions come in very small samples as his writings are scarce.\(^\text{194}\)

Johann Arndt was born in 1556 in Anhalt. He was infused with Lutheran doctrine through his studies both at Hemlstadt and Wittenberg. Considered a part of Lutheran Orthodoxy, he was an influential forerunner of what would become known as Pietism.

Arndt is best known for his literary contributions to theology. Unlike other Lutheran divines, his publications are more mystical and devotional in nature. He is

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193 Ibid., 6. “Verbis et factis eundem confiteantur, suos privatim in vera pietate instituant Deut. 6:20 curent ‘verbum Christi abundanter inter se habitare seque invicem doceant et commonefaciant psalmis hymnis et canticis spiritualibus.’

perhaps best known for the little volume *Wahres Christentum*, or *True Christianity*.\textsuperscript{195} Arndt also provides a good deal of development on confession in his *Quasimodogeniti* sermons. These sermons will be looked at first.

He lists four fundamental truths about confession in the church: universal confession is for the whole church, general confession daily is needed because we are guilty before God, special confession on specific offenses is needed, and private confession is a necessary ministry in the church.\textsuperscript{196} Arndt provides us with a vibrant understanding and practice of confession. He sees a place for both general confession and specific confession based on individual sins. Arndt fails in these sermons, however, to draw a hard line between public and private. It is clear from the above that he draws a general distinction, but he does not develop the idea further.

Arndt’s understanding of confession brings with it an understanding of who is hearing confession and providing absolution. The universal priesthood comes to the forefront here for a moment. Arndt is clear that friends or a “brüder” can provide absolution.\textsuperscript{197} Despite this, Arndt does not spend much time developing the universal priesthood alone or in relationship with the *Amt*.

\textsuperscript{195} This volume becomes well known a century later because of its republication with an introduction written by Philip Jakob Spener. The introduction became its own volume, *Pia Desideria*, or *Pious Longings*.


Luther and Arndt have a very different understanding of contrition, repentance, and absolution. Luther believed perfect contrition to be impossible for a human being to attain. The only way contrition could be attained was through the Holy Spirit. Arndt agreed in principle, but his understanding is different: “Blessed is the man who finds this holy calling in his heart, that is, the godly grief for sins brings about a regret of the blessed which no one regrets. The Godly sorrow the Holy Spirit brings about through the law and through earnest meditation and the holy suffering of Christ.”198 This Godly sorrow leads to repentance. True repentance is a work of God through the Spirit, but one must understand their sins and the wrath of God that it brings.199 Arndt goes further and says that true repentance is to die through true regret.200 He saw and expected individuals to receive full contrition, but this full contrition was based on a full understanding of one’s sin, unlike Luther. Repentance then leads to absolution.

There are significant differences on the specific topic of absolution. Arndt defines absolution as simply the application of the blood of Jesus Christ.201 This application of the blood of Jesus is based on an individual’s full understanding of their

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199 Ibid.

200 Ibid., 55.

sins to be absolved from. This position is exactly the opposite of Luther’s understanding of the role of the Spirit in contrition as well as the importance of the law in preaching and bringing about conversion. Arndt emphasizes true contrition in forgiveness, Luther sees no scriptural reason for this type of contrition. The True Christianity spends much more time developing a full understanding of repentance than it does on absolution. A final quote from Arndt is informative on his emphasize on sorrow and repentance vs. the importance of absolution: “Look thus, dear Christian, and you will find God’s grace through Christian knowledge of your misery and through the faith. The more miserable you are in your heart, the dearer you are to God and the more graciously God will look upon you.”

Johann Dannhauer

Perhaps no one provides a stronger bridge between Luther and Spener than Johann Dannhauer. Dannhauer, born in 1603 at Köndrigen, was educated in the gymnasium at Strasborg and was an early philosophical master before he started his theological training in 1624. Dannhauer continued his studies at Marburg, Altdorf, and Jena. While at Jena he received great recognition of his exegesis of Ephesians. Upon returning to Strasborg he was made seminary inspector. Later he became professor of


204 Ibid.
oratory and professor of theology. He was also rising in the ecclesiastical ranks, as he was appointed pastor of the cathedral and the president of the ecclesiastical assembly. Dannhauer was a part of a group known as the “Johannine triad”: Johann Schmidt, Johann Dorsche, and Dannhauer himself. Gritsch claims he was the greatest of the three. He exercised great influence through fighting Catholicism, Calvinism, and non-orthodox Lutheranism. He fundamentally believed that pure doctrine could not be combined with any ecumenical efforts to unite Catholics and Protestants. He wrote extensively on both theology and philosophy, with more than fifty publications. His most significant writings are *Hodosophia christiana sive theologia positiva* (*Hodosophia Christiana or Positive Theology*) (1649), *Katechismusmilch oder Erklärung des kirchlichen Katechismus* (*Catechism-milk, or Explanation of the Church’s Catechism*) (1657–1678), and *Liber conscientiae apertus sive theologia conscientiaria* (*The Book of Conscience Laid Open, or The Theology of Conscience*) (1662–1667).

As mentioned above, the connection between Dannhauer and Spener is significant. Dannhauer ordained Spener and most likely secured him the post of private tutor at the Palatinate. Spener played a role in the printing of the second edition of Dannhauer’s *Hodosophia*. Dannhauer’s biggest influence on Spener came through his

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205 Ibid.
207 Ibid.
208 Ibid.
209 Ibid.
theology, particularly in the area of confession and the universal priesthood. His contribution will be briefly looked at next.

Dannhauer believed that there were two kinds of confession, public and private. Public confession was done in front of the church in the case of a public calamity, citing Leviticus 16:21, 1 Samuel 7:5, and Nehemiah 9:1.\(^{210}\) Dannhauer split private confession into two pieces. Confession could occur between individuals and the church. Secondly, confession could occur between two individuals. If there were a public scandal, the individual would need to confess in private to the church. Dannhauer emphasizes that an individual may confess to a neighbor, “coram proximo iusta” or a minister “coram ministro tuta.”\(^{211}\) Dannhauer explains, “This confession to ministers as in the case with confession before men in general (just as with minister’s absolution) is not absolutely necessary since there is no command for it otherwise. How would someone be comforted if he’s in a place or circumstance where the fullness of ministry is not present?\(^{212}\) Dannhauer emphasizes the ability of the universal priesthood to provide the comfort of absolution where there is a lack of the “fullness of ministry” or when a minister is not present. Dannhauer does allow that confession to a minister is fitting for the sake of order and where the confession would bring scandal on the neighbor.\(^{213}\)

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211 Ibid.

212 Ibid. “Que confessio cum and coram hominibu (sicut and absolutio Ministerii) non est absolute necessaria cum nullam eius rei extet mandatum: quomodo enim confiditur illi, qui in eo loco aut necessitate constiutus est, ubi Ministerii copia non Habetur?″

213 Ibid.
Dannhauer firmly believes in an office of ministry. The keys and the ability to distribute sacraments rightly belong to the office itself. The preaching of the office is essential for the life of the church. Preaching is important because it leads to confession. Confession is fundamentally important to Dannhauer because it leads to absolution. Absolution is the highest point of the Gospel, making confession absolutely essential:

“All ministers of the church are orthodox in so far as they preach and apply the Gospel of absolution, which absolution is the highest point of the Gospel.”

While believing in an office of ministry, he taught, “the ministry is an instrument of the Holy Spirit, but not in an exclusive sense.” In other words, while the office is inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is not limited to inspiring only the office of public ministry. It can and does inspire other ministries, like the laity in the universal priesthood. Dannhauer believes the keys were given to the office of ministry, but were also inspired by the Holy Spirit. Dannhauer lays out the ability of the universal priesthood to possess and execute the power of the keys: “In the lack of this order of ministry, in the case of necessity by whatever persons suited to their community who have been made kings and priests by Christ can both teach, baptize, and absolve.”

Someone from the public office of ministry need not be present. Dannhauer claims that

214 Hodosophia Phaenom. XI 503–4.993–94 Tablæ XIII.

215 Hodosophia Phaenom X 492.970 Tablæ XIII. “Omnes ministri ecclesiae orthodoxi, quatenus evangelium absolutionis, quaesummus evangeli est apex, praedicant, applicantque.”

216 Hodosophia Phaenom X 495.976 Tablæ XIII. “Organum, inqua m Spiritus Sancti, non exclusive.”

217 Hodosophia Phaenom. II 79.154 Tablæ IV. “Quae ordine deficient, in casu necessitates per quoslibet suae communitati idoneos a Christo Reges and Sacerdotes factos, et docere, et baptizare, et absolvere.”
“when everything is on fire, no other calling is needed except for the calling of charity.”

The church as the bride of Christ is allowed to dispense its “spoils,” and in the case of necessity, through any of its members:

What has been given to the whole church applies by right and in every respect to each member of the church and no less to make use of the benefits and other rights in respect to which we confess the communion of the saints (and also holy things). We have all been spiritual priests and kings. Therefore in case of necessity, when the sacrament is necessary and cannot be admitted in case of salvation (a principle that doesn’t apply to sacrament of eucharist, but it does baptism). Any Christian person is able to celebrate sacrament validly.

Echoing much of Luther’s thought, Dannhauer demonstrates a concern here for both order and the right exercising of rights by the universal priesthood in the church. As seen above, Dannhauer (like Luther) partners the importance of order with the rights of each Christian to exercise his or her own rights of hearing confession and speaking words of absolution.

As we have seen, Dannhauer (along with Arndt) provides the perfect bridge from Luther to Spener. In chapter 6, the essay will examine the birth of Pietism and Spener’s role in that birth. The role of the laity becomes clear within Spener’s theology, something he receives as an inheritance from Dannhauer.

218 Hodosophia Phaenom. II 79.154. Tablae IV. “Nec cum Omnia ardent, alia quam charitatis expectanda est vocatio.”


220 Hodosophia Phaenom X 511–12. 1009–10 Tablae 13. “Jam quod ecclesiae universae datum est, id omnino de jure ad singula Ecclesiae membra pertinent, non minus uti beneficia & πολλεν μαχα αλια, in quibus aliquam sanctorum (non masculine tantum, sed & neutraliter) bonorum communionem in symbolo profitemur. Omnes facti sumus sacerdotes & Reges spiritualis. Igitur in casu necessitates, cum sacramentum est necessarium, nec fine periculo salutis omitti potest (quae ratio cessat in sacramento Eucharistiae, obtinet in Sacramento Baptismi,) quilibet homo Christianus valide Sacramentum celebrare potest.”
Hymnody

Hymns are another source that shows us how religion is practiced at a popular level. Unlike the theological treatises by the figures we have examined, hymns were read and sung weekly, sometimes daily, in both house churches and city churches. They communicate the doctrines that were truly influential in the life of the laity. In order to get a general picture of hymnody in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we will focus on two important hymn writers from that period, Nicholas Herman and Johann Heerman.

Christopher Boyd Brown, in his book *Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation*, provides an excellent picture of the influence and importance of hymns for the developing evangelical churches of the Reformation.\(^\text{221}\) Many collections of hymns were available throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Michael Blume’s *Enchiridion geistlicher Gesenge und Psalmen für die Leien mit viel andern denn zuvor gebessert. Sampt der Vesper, Mettê, complet und Messe*, Valentine Bapst published *Luther’s Gesangbuch* in Leipzig in 1545; Paul Gerhardt’s *Geistliche Lieder*; and Freylinghausen’s *Geistreiches Gesang-Buch, den Kern alter und neuer Lieder in sich haltend: jetzo von neuen so eingerichtet, dass alle Gesänge, so in den vorhin unter diesem Namen alhier herausgekommenen Gesang-Büchern befindlich, unter ihre Rubriquen zusammengebracht, auch die Noten aller alten und deuen*

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Melodeyen beygefügct worden, und mit einem Vorbericht hrsg. von Gotthilf August Francken represent just a few.\textsuperscript{222}

One of the most influential hymn writers among the Lutherans was Nicholas Herman (ca. 1500–1561), born in Altdorf. After a move to Joachimsthal in 1520, he became an active supporter of Luther.\textsuperscript{223} Acting both as clergy and educator, Herman was influential in spreading Reformation ideals through music. Over the span of his life, he wrote, collected, expanded, and published over two hundred of his own German hymns. These hymns were sung by children and their parents in household devotions.\textsuperscript{224} As Brown points out, Herman’s influence lasted well into the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{225} His \textit{Die Sontags Evangelia} was very popular.\textsuperscript{226} Some of them became folk songs and were sung as far away as Hungary. In fact, as Brown further points out, they were still being sung into the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{227} Given the importance of his hymns, examining a sample will be important in understanding how Reformation theology was being applied at a


\textsuperscript{223} Brown, \textit{Singing the Gospel}, 27.

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 28.

\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 158.

\textsuperscript{226} Nicholas Herman, \textit{Die Sontags Evangelia, und von den fürnemsten Festen uber das gantze Jar, In Gesenge gefasset fur Christliche Hausveter und ire Kinder} (Wittenberg: G. Rhau Erben, 1561).

\textsuperscript{227} Brown, \textit{Singing the Gospel}, 158.
popular level. Here is an example of one of Herman’s popular hymns, “Yea, as I Live, Jehovah Saith” (“So wahr ich lebe, spricht Gott der Herr”), written in 1560.

1. Yea, as I live, Jehovah saith,  
   I would not have the sinner’s death,  
   But that he turn from error’s ways,  
   Repent, and live through endless days.

2. To us therefore Christ gave command:  
   Go forth and preach in every land;  
   Bestow on all My pardoning grace  
   Who will repent and mend their ways.

3. All those whose sins ye thus remit  
   I truly pardon and acquit,  
   And those whose sins ye do retain  
   Condemned and guilty shall remain.

4. What ye shall bind, that bound shall be:  
   What ye shall loose, that shall be free;  
   Unto My Church the keys are given  
   To open and close the gates of heaven.

5. They who believe when ye proclaim  
   The joyful tidings in My name  
   That I for them My blood have shed,  
   Are free from guilt and Judgment dread.

6. The words which absolution give  
   Are His who died that we might live;  
   The minister whom Christ has sent  
   Is but His humble instrument.

7. However great our sin may be,  
   The absolution sets us free,  
   Appointed by God’s own dear Son  
   To bring the pardon He has won.

8. When ministers lay on their hands,  
   Absolved by Christ the sinner stands;  
   He who by grace the Word believes

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228 Herman, Nicolaus. Die Sonntags-evangelia von Nicolaus Herman (J. G. Onden: Hamburg, 1860), 277.
The purchase of His blood receives.

9. This is the power of Holy Keys,
It binds and doth again release;
The Church retains them at her side,
Our mother and Christ’s holy Bride.

10. All praise, eternal Son,
to Thee For absolution full and free,
In which Thou showest forth Thy grace;
From false indulgence guard our race.

11. Praise God the Father and the Son
And Holy Spirit, Three in One,
As ’twas, is now, and so shall be
World without end, eternally!

This hymn contains some helpful insights. First, the keys belong to the whole church and not just the pope (consistent with Luther). Second, there is a heavy emphasis on the power of the keys and absolution; receiving absolution for one’s sins is important. Third, it is the minister who absolves the individual. Herman makes no indication if this

229 Musica International Database. “So wahr ich lebe, spricht Gott der Herr.” Musica Database.
http://www.musicanet.org/robokopp/hymn/yeasiliv.htm
1. So wahr ich leb’, spricht Gott der Herr,
Des Sünders Tod ich nicht begehr’,
Sondern daß er bekehre sich,
Tu’ Buß’ und lebe ewiglich.

2. Drum Christ, der Herr, sein’ Jünger sandt’: Geht hin, predigt in allem Land Vergebung der Sünd’ jedermann, Dem’s leid ist, glaubt und will ablan.

3. Wem ihr die Sünd’ vergeben werd’t, Soll ihr’r los sein auf dieser Erd’. Wem ihr sie b’halt’t im Namen mein, Dem sollen sie behalten sein.

4. Was ihr bind’t, soll gebunden sein; Was ihr auflöst, das soll los sein. Die Schlübel zu dem Himmelreich Hiermit ich euch geb’ allen gleich.
**The German translation is missing vs. 5,7,9.

6. Wenn uns der Beicht’ger absolviert,
Sein Amt der Herr Christ durch ihn führt
Und spricht uns selbst von Sünden rein;
Sein Werkzeug ist der Dien’r allein.

8. Wem der Beicht’ger auflegt sein’ Hand, Dem löst Christ auf der Sünden Band Und absolviert ihn durch sein Blut; Wer’s glaubt, aus Gnad’ hat solches Gut.

10. Wen nun sein G’wißen beißt und nagt, Die Sünd’ quält, daß er schier verzagt, Der halt’ sich zu dem Gnadenthron, Zum Wort der Absolution.

11. Lob sei dir, wahrer Gottessohn, Für die heil’g’ Absolution, Darin du zeigst dein’ Gnad’ und Gü’t; Vor falschem Ablaß uns behüt!
represents the ministerial office or the universal priesthood. Given that he is not explicit
that it is everyone, one would assume he is referring to the office of ministry here.

Another influential figure in early Lutheran hymnody was Johann Heerman (ca.
1585–1647). Brown points out that as Herman’s popularity began to wane, Heerman’s
hymns became a “worthy replacement.” Heerman began his career as a pastor but also
served as an educator and tutor. He was educated in theology, rhetoric, and law. Early in
his career he developed the habit of writing poetry. One of his most influential collections
was *Sonntag- und Fest-Evangelia.* His writings were generally intended for *hauskirche*
(“house church”), much as Herman’s were. While following Herman, Heerman made
some unique developments of his own. His hymns reflect the changes in Lutheran piety
that were taking place in the seventeenth century. The changes are evident when one
compares his hymn “As Truly as I live, Says your God” (“So wahr ich lebe, spricht dein
Gott”) (1630) with Herman’s hymn above.

1. As truly as I live, says your God:
   I take no pleasure in the death of a sinner;
   it is rather my wish and will that he should always keep away from sin,
   turn from his evil and live with me forever


Also see Philipp Wackernagel, *Johann Heerman geistliche Lieder* (Stuttgart: S. G. Liesching, 1856). It
should be noted that Heerman’s hymn that appears here is also reprinted in Johann Freylinghausen,
*Geistreiches Gesang-Buch, den Kern alter und neuer Lieder in sich haltend: jetzo von neuen so
eingerichtet, dass alle Gesänge, so in den vorhin unter diesem Namen alhier herausgekommenen Gesang-
Büchern befindlich, unter ihre Rubriquen zusammengebracht, auch die Noten aller alten und deuen
Melodeyen beygefüget worden, und mit einem Vorbericht hrsg. von Gotthilf August Francken* (Halle:
Waysenhaus, 1741). There are no substantial changes to the text.


233 Ibid.

2. Think about this word, human child, do not despair in your sins: here you shall find consolation, salvation and grace which God has promised to you and indeed confirmed with a precious oath, O blessed is the person who is sorry for his sins.

3. But guard yourself against confidence, do not think: there is still time enough for repentance; I still want to be joyful on earth; when I am weary of this life then I shall be converted, God will of course have mercy on me.

4. It is true: God is indeed always ready with compassion for the sinner. But anyone who uses grace to go on sinning is continuing in his evil mind. and does not care for his soul, he will be dismissed without grace

5. Grace has been promised you by God for the sake of Christ’s blood and death: he has not wished to tell you if you will live till tomorrow, you have been informed that you must die: but your hour of death is hidden from you.

6. Today you live, today be converted, before tomorrow comes, things could change. The person who today is vigorous, healthy, ruddy, tomorrow is ill, or even dead. If you die now without repentance your body and soul must burn there.

7. Help, oh Lord Jesus, help me so this day I may come to you and in a moment do penance before swift death overtakes me, so that in this way today and at all times I may be ready for my journey home.\textsuperscript{235}

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid.

1. So wahr ich lebe, spricht dein Gott, mir ist nicht lieb des Sünders Tod, Vielmehr ist dies mein wunsch und will, daß er von Sünden halte still, von seiner Bosheit fehre sich und lebe mit mir ewiglich.

Heerman’s hymn (written sixty years after Herman’s) is different from Herman’s in a few ways. First, there is greater emphasis on subjective religious experience. Second, because of this focus on heartfelt repentance, the hymn addresses the person in the second person, not the third, as we see in Herman’s hymn.236

This brief look at these two influential hymn writers reveals a limited emphasis on absolution (seen really only in Herman) and a focus on repentance alone. This is in continuity with many of the theologians we looked at from the same time period. Given that these hymns were sung day to day, both at home and at church, it is safe to assume that the emphasis on repentance and not absolution bled through to the everyday life of the laity, regardless of what the theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were committed to.

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2. Dies Wort bedenk, o Menschenkind, verzweifle nicht in deiner Sünd: hier findest du Trost, heil und Gnad, die Gott dir zugesaget hat, Und zwar mit einem theuren Eid; o selig, dem die Sünd ist leid.


5. Gnad hat dir zugesaget Gott von wegen Christi Blut und Tod: zu sagen hat er nicht gewollt, ob du bis morgen leben sollst; Daß du mußt sterben ist dir kund: verborgen ist des Todestund

6. Heut lebst du, heut bekehre dich, eh morgen kommt kanns ändern sich; wer heut ist frisch, gesund und roth, ist morgen krank, ja wol gar todt: so du nun stirbest ohne Buß, dein Seel und Leib dort leiden muß


CONCLUSION

The period of Lutheran Orthodoxy was rich. It provided this nascent movement with order and doctrinal clarity. At the same time, it severely limited the development of theology, especially in the area of the universal priesthood and absolution. These two were not absent, but they were not priorities as they were for Luther.

Hymns and church orders reflected the popular application of theology for everyday believers. Orthodoxy theology were applied at the popular level for those hearing and singing hymns. Hymns and orders put greater emphasis on the universal priesthood and absolution through the lens of personal experience.

Spener inherited all of this. His writing *Pia Desideria* and *Spiritual Priesthood* represented a continuation of what came before, but claimed to return to Luther’s doctrine itself. The next chapter will examine Spener’s theology and his understanding of the role of the universal priesthood and absolution.
CHAPTER SIX
SPENER AND THE BIRTH OF PIETISM

Introduction

The age of Lutheran Orthodoxy helped define “true Lutheran doctrine” and what it meant to be “Lutheran.” Late in the sixteenth century, another influence within the church was growing: Pietism.¹ Carter Lindberg, while pointing out the difficulty of achieving a standard definition of Pietism,² provides a helpful definition that will inform and guide this chapter:

Pietism is the term for the far-reaching movement of the late 17th and early 18th centuries which set for itself the goal of a new Reformation because the first Reformation had become stuck in Old Protestant Orthodoxy, in the institutional and dogmatic. Pietism’s watchwords therefore became “life” vs. “doctrine,” “Spirit,” vs. “office,” “power” vs. “appearance” (2 Tim 3:5). The Reformation’s central concept of faith received the characteristic addition, “living faith,” the liveliness being sought in the ethical “fruits of faith,” above all love; thereby affecting the social characteristic of Pietism. Christian perfection became the main theme. Therefore it is natural to view the essence of Pietism in its piety. . . . In the place of justification with its correlation of Word of God (as promise)—faith and law—Gospel appeared rebirth.³

Early leaders of Pietism understood themselves as faithful disciples of Luther. Philipp Jakob Spener never claimed the title of reformer, but his followers saw him as Luther’s successor. Spener’s influence on Pietism was seminal to its development. His writings reflect and represent much of Pietistic theology. In this chapter I will examine the

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¹ Many strains of Pietism developed in the wake of Spener and Pia Desideria. This study will refer to Spener-Halle Pietism, or what is often referred to as “classical Pietism.” A thorough presentation on the different strains can be found in Ernst Stoeffler, “Pietism: Its Message, Early Manifestation, and Significance,” Covenant Quarterly 34 (1976): 4.


context, content, and influence of Pietism on Lutheran doctrine. I will focus particular attention on three of Spener’s writings—*Pia Desideria* (“Pious Longings”), *Das geistliche Priesterthum* (“The Spiritual Priesthood”), and his *Quasimogeniti* (John 20) sermons and look more at how Spener develops the doctrines of universal priesthood and absolution in these writings.

Pietist identity was shaped primarily by three elements: The Peace of Augsburg (1555), the Thirty Year’s War, and Lutheran Orthodoxy. The Peace of Augsburg (1555) laid out edicts that allowed each territory in the Holy Roman Empire (upwards of three hundred) to establish its own rule of law and official religious practices. Each prince was allowed to set his own religious belief and how that belief would be applied in his land (*cuius regio, eius religio*). Essentially, it accepted the religious schism and created the conditions for the future of Lutheranism.⁴

The Thirty Years War (1618–1648) devastated Germany in numerous ways. First, the sociological climate was dramatically changed. Armed conflict, famine, and disease all partnered to wipe out anywhere from 20 to 30 percent of the population. Much of the remaining civilian population was displaced to the cities, leading to further disease and health issues. The breaking up of families and faith communities due to the disease and displacement furthered the problem. Many believed that the war and its destruction were divine punishment for the people’s abandoning “true repentance” while focusing in on the codification of Lutheran church life.

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Second, the political and religious ramifications of the war caused Germany to be extensively divided. The Peace of Westphalia (1648) affirmed the 1555 Peace of Augsburg, but went a step further. The rights of the Lutherans were now extended to the Reformed as long as a Reformed prince ruled the land. Secondly religious groups not in territories ruled by princes that practiced that religion were able to privately practice their religion without any official sanction, threat of exile, or persecution as long as they obeyed territorial laws. This physical and social destruction of the country created new opportunities for religious renewal.

Lutheran Orthodoxy also helped to provide fertile ground for Pietism. The many controversies that arose from varying interpretations of the Augsburg Confession. These controversies fractured the once united Lutheran front. The Peace of Augsburg in 1555 allowed each territory to have its own confessional identity, allowing for varieties of Lutheranism to spring up in numerous territories. Each territory developed its own practices and variations on Lutheran theology and each saw its position as correct. The varying positions are seen in the intra-Lutheran controversies mentioned above.

Pietists saw Lutheran Orthodoxy’s commitment to “largely irrelevant theologumena” as being fundamentally responsible for the deplorable state of the German

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5 Gritsch, 112. The Mennonites were left out of these rights.


8 See Gritsch, History, 86–95.
church. These controversies proved to be detrimental to the heart of Lutheranism: “The fervent spirit that had stirred them to action, and to sacrifice, had been quenched in the long struggle for religious liberty. . . . The church had become the heritage of a generation of warriors who while they preserved and protected her, had developed those passions which destroyed her inner life.” This supposed “destruction of her inner life” was central to the theology of Pietism. Instead, the Pietists believed individuals were without practical application of faith in their lives because of overemphasis on theological systemization. All aspects of traditional theology that were not strictly oriented toward the Christian life were either not treated at all or given only peripheral attention.

Pietism: Theology, Figures, and Influences

Pietism sought to shift emphasis from the merely objective treatment of doctrinal truth to the subjective application of this truth. Subjective application of truth is the observable practice of piety in the individual’s everyday life. Pietism emphasized the concept of Wiedergeburt, or “new birth.” Wiedergeburt is how frömmigkeit, or

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10 Marie Richard, Philip Jakob Spener and His Work (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1897), 5.

11 Ibid., 45.


“godliness,” is lived out. Personal belief in doctrine is not enough, an individual must live what he or she believes.14

This emphasis was evident in certain unifying elements or themes. Kurt Aland identifies four specific unifying elements of Pietism. First, the individual must have radical religious renewal that becomes apparent in daily practice. The impact of one’s faith must be observable in his or her life. Second, the individual must believe in Divine support for this renewed existence as reflected in the Bible. Third, the individual must believe human support for this renewed existence is found in the Christian koinonia. Fourth, Christians have a sense of deliberate distinctiveness over and against not only the world but also the general membership of the churches of the day. Pietists saw the attitude and conduct of both the world and the church as being motivated by the spirit of the “world.”15

Egon Gerdes also identifies what he refers to as four clusters or tenets of Pietism.16 The first tenet is Natura Pietatis, which reflects the pietistic concern for the “new birth.” Natura Pietatis is the third step in a three-step process, the first being the ignition of faith through the Word and the second being justification or forgiveness of sins and the adoption in the family of God. This is not understood to be a once-and-for-all event, but a process of growth.

Pietists disagreed with its inherited ordo salutis. The traditional Lutheran ordo is as follows—vocatio (“calling”), illuminatio (“illumination through revelation”),

15 Kurt Aland, Spener, Studien (Berlin: de Gruyder, 1943), 10.
penitentia ("penance or sorrow"), and finally fides salvifica ("saving faith"). The disagreement comes in the understanding of illuminatio. The traditional Lutheran illuminatio was about faith in Christ alone. The Holy Spirit illuminated the mind of an individual, which led him or her to faith in Christ. For Pietists like Spener, illuminatio was not just a changing of the mind but a changing or moving of the will. Theological knowledge was not the same as experiencing salvation. The subjective appropriation of faith leading to its application was central to Pietism.

The second tenet is collegia pietatis. These “Pious Groups” were created by Spener to promote more effective Christian living and to cultivate holiness. Meetings were held on a regular basis and included prayer, devotional readings, edifying discussion, and Bible study. Groups that sprang up within the church for this purpose were referred to as ecclesiolae in ecclesia, or “churches within the church.” The idea of ecclesiolae in ecclesia introduces an oppositional element in Pietist theology. Pietists wanted to differentiate themselves from other baptized Christians whose faith they deemed to be superficial.

Ecclesiological and eschatological elements also emerge here. These “churches within the church” can be seen as the invisible church hidden in the visible church. The

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19 Ibid.
20 Lindberg, Pietist, 82, 274.
21 Ernest Stoeffler, Pietism, 13
Pietists believed the church had been corrupted since ever since Constantine. This invisible church was made up of those who were righteous and had a true spiritual relationship with God. Gottfried Arnold referred to this invisible church as the “hidden seed.” The second coming of Christ would then separate not the church from the rest, but the true believers (hidden church) from the visible church.

The third tenet is Praxis Pietatis. This reflects the pietistic concern for the application of doctrinal truth. Personal conduct should reflect what one believes. Each believer is responsible for the community around him or her and the social ills that exist. There was a mutual obligation for all Christians to help others based on the reading of passages like Matthew 5–7 and Acts 2 and 4. Pietism again reveals its eschatological priority in that better future times lay ahead for the church. God had promised better times and it was up to believers to begin to act decisively to make these good times come to fruition. Conscience was thus eschatologically motivated for the Pietists.

The last tenet is Reformatio Pietatis. This tenet reflects the pietistic concern to continue Lutheran reform past mere doctrinal reform to its completion in ethical reform. This tenet encompasses many different aspects of Pietism. First, Pietists placed a high

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 36.

24 It should be pointed out here that the concept of the “church within the church” or the “invisible church” does not find its genesis with the Pietists. This is an idea that goes back as early as Wycliffe.


26 Ibid., 39.
emphasis on the role of the pastorate for modeling behavior. Pastors were not expected to be perfect, but were expected to remember that their life was a reflection of the office and vice versa. Despite the efficacy of the office of the word and sacraments, a good example on the pastor’s part would incline his hearers all the more to the power of the gospel. Second, Pietists emphasized the priesthood of all believers; no doctrine was more persistently dealt with. Further, no effort was spared in attempting to effect a proper use of the doctrine. Each individual believer had the right and responsibility to oversee his or her own spiritual development. This would include personal Bible study, prayer, and sharing spiritual conversations with other believers.

Two important misconceptions should be noted in the context of this introduction. The first is the notion that Pietism lends itself both to privatized and individualized religion. A distinction should be made between private and personal. Pietism sought to encourage personal, not private, religion and faith. As pointed out by John Weborg, privacy can be a result, but should not be seen as the intent. Second, the emphasis on the individual should not be seen as coming at the expense of the communal. The priesthood of believers means that individual gifts are given to each believer for communal use. Christians were to be actively involved in the ministry of care and service under the training and supervision of the pastor.

27 Ibid., 27–29.
30 Ibid., 60.
31 Ibid.
Philipp Jakob Spener: Father of Pietism

Spener is widely considered to be the father of classical Pietism. He set into motion a movement of reform within the contemporary Lutheran church with the publication of *Pia Desideria* in 1675. In this section I will briefly introduce Spener’s life and work. Then I will examine Spener’s theology with the goal of elucidating his position on both the doctrine of the universal priesthood and absolution.

Spener was born into a Lutheran family that emphasized piety and education. Next to the Bible, Spener’s favorite book was Arndt’s *True Christianity*. Following his elementary education, Spener entered the University of Strasbourg to obtain a master’s degree. His years at Strasbourg were extremely influential. Spener was introduced to and studied under John Conrad Dannhauer. Dannhauer introduced Spener to Luther’s works and taught him to think of salvation as a present and not merely a future gift of God. He opened his eyes to the importance and role of the laity (as seen above in chapter 3); and

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32 Carter Lindberg’s book *The Pietist Theologians* provides a great introduction and summary to all the major Pietist figures, such as Franke, Zinzendorf, and Arnold. While Spener is not the only significant figure in Pietism, he is frequently considered to be the first.

33 For an excellent overview of the official (ecclesial) confession and absolution at the time of Spener, see Claudia Drese, “Der Berliner Beichstuhlstreet oder Phillip Jakob Spener zwischen allen Stuhlen?” *Pietismus and Neuzeit* 2 (2005): 60–97.

34 Lindberg, *Pietist*, 84.


36 Dannauer’s contributions are seen in chap. 5 with the other orthodox theologians.

37 Tappert, 10.
suggested the use of the vernacular instead of the Latin in some phases of theological education.\textsuperscript{38}

Spener began to put his learning into practice when serving as senior of the clergy in Frankfurt am Main in 1666. Two aspects of ministry were important to Spener. The first was the religious education of children. He strengthened the catechetical program that was held on Sunday afternoons (\textit{Kinderlehre}).\textsuperscript{39} Perhaps more importantly, he emphasized and encouraged lay spiritual development.

As early as 1669 Spener was developing his idea of the \textit{collegia pietatis}. These groups would exist for the edification of everyone who attended. The first actual meetings of this sort took place a year later. The meetings took place on Wednesdays and Sundays in Spener’s home. Individuals participated in prayer and discussion of the past sermons or devotional books that were read. Men and women attended, but were seated separately from each other and only men were allowed to speak.\textsuperscript{40} Spener continued his development of Christian piety in his appointments that came after Frankfurt: Saxony, Dresden, and Berlin.

Spener’s focus on Christian piety does not mean that he was theologically naive or uninformed. As Lindberg points out, all of his writings dealt at the base level with theological issues, and his sermons were “largely exegetical and didactic.”\textsuperscript{41} Even in his correspondence we can find him applying doctrine to personal problems that people

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 14.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Lindberg, \textit{Pietist}, 96.
\end{itemize}
faced. The “pamphlet wars” he waged both inside and outside of his Lutheran church, for example, were usually related to theological issues. K. James Stein summarizes the importance of Spener’s work:

It can be said that Spener continued Luther’s Reformation. Against a prevailing scholastic theology and a dominant formalism in church life, he called for a vital faith relationship with Christ and its attendant freedom for loving service. His ability to apply Christian theology to Christian living is a major reason why Spener is regarded as the most important leader, after Martin Luther, in the history of German Protestantism.

Writings

In this section I will study Spener’s most influential writings. For my purposes, three texts will be examined: *Pia Desideria (Pious Desires)*, *Das Geistliche Priesterthum (Spiritual Priesthood)*, and his *Quasimodogeniti* sermons. Each reveals aspects of Spener’s thought on both the universal priesthood and absolution.

Pia Desideria

*Pia Desideria* was originally written as an introduction to a collection of Johann Arndt’s sermons. The writing was so influential that numerous requests came in to get copies of it alone. He amended the eight pages, originally titled “Salutation and Explanation of the Circumstances of Writing” into a full-fledged book. *Pia Desideria* ended up being his most popular and perhaps most influential work. The book, primarily addressed to the pastors of the Lutheran church, expresses disappointment with the condition of the Lutheran church:

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Stein, Philip, 94.
The wretched conditions which we deplore are known to all. Nobody is forbidden to shed tears over them, be it in private or in places where others may behold the tears and may thereby be moved to sympathy and cooperation. When one sees distress and sickness it is natural to look about for remedies. The precious spiritual body of Christ is now afflicted with distress and sickness.\footnote{45 Philip Spener, \textit{Die Werke Philipp Jakob Speners Studeienausgabe}, edited by Kurt Aland (Basel: Brunnen, 2006) hereafter referred to as PSS. Spener, \textit{Pia Desideria}, PSS 1:91 (Tappert, 31). “Malum, quod lugemus, ante oculos, adeoque omnibus integrum est, super illud lacrymas suas non solum in secreto effundere, verum etiam eo loco earum cursusm non sistere, ubi alii easdem vident, & moveri possunet, ut & condoleant, & consilium, si quod est, ipsi quoque in medium conferant. Ubi morbo videmus &alia mala, natura nos eo invitat, ut de remediiis circumspiciamus. Unde omnibus aequae incumbit, nobilissimo spirituali Christ corpore tam periculosus morbi laborante.”}

\textit{Pia Desideria} is broken up into three parts. The first is titled “Conspecus of Corrupt Conditions in the Church.” Here Spener examines three estates: civil authorities, clergy, and common people. He is focused on how all three groups have not lived up to their spiritual responsibilities. Corruption, drunkenness, and lawsuits between neighbors all show lack of “new birth” and were killing the church.\footnote{46 Stein, \textit{Philip}, 95.} The second section is titled “The Possibility of Better Conditions.”\footnote{47 Tappert, 87.} Spener immediately begins this section with the claim not only that should the church be better, but also that God has \textit{promised} it will be better: “If we consult Holy Scriptures we can have no doubt that God promised his church here on earth a better state than this.”\footnote{48 Spener, \textit{Pia Desideria}, PSS 1:173 (Tappert 76). “Si Scripturam S. inspiciamus dubitandum non est, quod Deus Ecclesiae in terris conditionem adhuc meliorem pollicitus sit.”} God’s promise in Romans 11 to convert the Jews was one source of this hope. The second was the fall of papal Rome that Protestants believed was promised in Revelation 18 and 19.\footnote{49 Ibid}
The hope of God’s promise sets the stage for section three, “Proposals to Correct the Conditions in the Church.” Spener gives six suggestions for actions that the church can undertake to improve its conditions: (1) A more extensive use of the word of God; (2) the establishment and diligent exercise of the spiritual priesthood; (3) the putting into practice of the knowledge of the Christian faith; (4) awareness of how the church conducts itself in religious controversies; (5) reform in the education of clergy, and (6) the preaching of edifying sermons that can be understood by people. For the purposes of this study, the first two proposals are most informative and will be examined here.

The first suggestion that Spener makes is that Christians adopt a “more extensive use of the Word of God amoung us.” Spener is not against exegetical sermons where the congregation sits and listens. He believes that adding personal reading would accentuate the sermon. Spener gives three different suggestions to spur on personal reading of the scriptures. First, one can start reading a section of the Bible; Spener suggests starting with the New Testament. Second, he suggests that people should read aloud the Bible so that those who are illiterate can benefit. Lastly, Spener suggests the addition of collegia pietatis. As mentioned above, these groups would allow for free reading of scripture without comment unless necessary. Those who have more experience or knowledge are able, if necessary, to stand up and explain the passage for everyone’s benefit. This explanation may or may not come from the pastor.

50 Tappert, 87.
51 Spener, Pia Desideria, PSS 1:193 (Tappert, 87). “Si in id sedulo laboraremus, ut verbum Dei opulentius inter nos habitaret. (Italics in original).
52 Spener, Pia Desideria, PSS 1:195 (Tappert, 89-90).
The reading of scripture by laypeople does not merely address the need for personal knowledge and piety; Spener sees it as a weapon against the papacy.\textsuperscript{53}

Individuals would no longer be ignorant of God’s Word. The pope’s word was not the last word; scripture now had the last word. Everyone would be able to judge doctrine on its own merits by familiarizing himself or herself with scripture.\textsuperscript{54}

Second, Spener emphasizes the importance of the universal priesthood. He appeals to Luther’s definition of the universal priesthood:

> This second proposal is the establishment and diligent exercise of the spiritual priesthood. . . . Luther points out that all Christian have been called to exercise spiritual functions. . . . Every Christian is bound not only to offer himself and what he has, his prayer, thanksgiving, good works, alms, etc., but also industriously to study the Word of the Lord, with the grace that is given him to teach others, especially those under his own roof.\textsuperscript{55}

Like Luther, Spener holds to the idea that all of those who are baptized are a part of the spiritual priesthood, referring to 1 Peter 2:9.

For Spener also, the universal priesthood did not just bestow rights to every baptized believer. Each believer also had great responsibility – this is reminiscent of Luther’s appeal to churches in Wittenberg and Orlamünde. They were not only required

\textsuperscript{53} Spener, \textit{Pia Desideria}, PSS 1:99 (Tappert, 92).

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} Spener, \textit{Pia Desideria}, PSS 1:203-207 (Tappert, 92-93). “Quod jam secundum esto: \textit{restauratio & sedulum exercitium spiritualis sacerdotii}. . . . Luther demonstratum est, ad spiritualia munia (non etiam ho’rum publicam functionem). . . . universos Christianos vocatos, nec jure tantum ad ea instructos. . . . Hoc est, quemvis Christianorum ad hoc divinitus vocatum esse, ut non solum seipsum & quicquid in se est, preces gratiarum actionem, bona opera, eleemosynas &c. DEO offerat, verum etiam verbo divino mula cum industria incumbat, alios inprimitis domesticos pro modulo concessae gratiae doceat, corripiat moneat.” It is interesting to note that Spener says, “especially those under his own roof,” instead of, “exclusively those under his own roof.” (Italics are in the original). The issue of public and private emerges
to offer up themselves in prayer and good works, but they were also required to read and
teach the Word of God. (Here in the *Pia*, Spener limits this teaching to those under the
same roof as the teacher [family, etc]).\(^{56}\) The universal priesthood also had the
responsibility of paying attention to the minister. They are to admonish him when he is
doing something wrong, but provide general support.\(^{57}\)

Spener then articulates the importance of the universal priesthood to the office of
ministry and the minister himself. The universal priesthood would aid the office of
ministry, as the minister cannot do everything.\(^{58}\) Spener makes it clear that any action that
the universal priesthood takes happens in the private realm. The office’s tasks are in the
public realm.

Spener’s definition of the universal priesthood is dependent on Luther, but moves
beyond Luther. Luther sees a responsibility for the universal priesthood, but never
articulates it relative to the minister or office of ministry. The only responsibility Luther
articulates relative to the minister is the calling or removal of a minister and judging the
minister’s teaching relative to doctrine. Spener sees a role for the priesthood that moves
beyond that to helping the minister accomplish tasks that he may not have time for.

Das Geistliche Priesterthum (“Spiritual Priesthood”)

Spener expands on the role and responsibility of the universal priesthood in his
treatise *Das geistliche Priesterthum (Spiritual Priesthood)*. He believes he is merely

\(^{56}\) Spener, *Pia Desideria*, PSS 1:207 (Tappert, 94).

\(^{57}\) Ibid.

\(^{58}\) Ibid.
building on Luther’s doctrine.\footnote{Philip Spener, \textit{Geistliche Priesterthum}, Philip Spener Werke, hereafter referred to as PSW, Translated by A. G. Voigt (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1917), 14.} The writing is laid out in a question-and-answer format; there are seventy questions in all. The questions range from “what is the spiritual priesthood?” (Question 1) to “what does the Apostles’ Creed teach us in regard to the matter of the universal priesthood?” (Question 48).\footnote{Spener, \textit{Geistliche Priesterthum}, PSW 1:569 (Voigt, \textit{Spiritual Priesthood}, 1). “Was ist das geistliche priesterthum?” PSW 1:55 (Voigt, \textit{Spiritual Priesthood}, 28) “Was zeiget uns dann der Apostolische glaube hieher gehörges?”} Spener’s writing is revealing as he discusses the relationship between the universal priesthood and the office of ministry. \textit{Geistliche} expands the role of the universal priesthood well past what is found in the \textit{Pia}.

As mentioned above, Spener understands the difference between office of ministry and universal priesthood to be “public” and “private.” The office of ministry exists for the public acts of ministry such as administering the sacraments. The universal priesthood has many of the same responsibilities of the office, like teaching scripture, but he expects it to be done privately in one’s own home: “Question 27—How shall they use the Word of God for themselves? They shall use it for themselves and among or with others.”\footnote{Spener, \textit{Geistliche Priesterthum}, PSW 1:596 (Voigt, \textit{Spiritual Priesthood}, 20). “Wie haben sie aber mit dem wort Gottes umbzugehen?”} Spener is also clear that Christians have a responsibility for the salvation of others: “Question 46—Has a Christian also a duty to care for the salvation and edification of others? Certainly; this is shown in God’s Word everywhere. All the parts of the catechism also direct us to it.”\footnote{Spener, \textit{Geistliche Priesterthum}, PWS 1:623 (Voigt, \textit{Spiritual Priesthood}, 28). “Ist dann ein Christ vor deß andern seligkeit und aufferbauung auch zu forgen schuldig.”} Spener is abundantly clear that Christians have a
responsibility to one another. They are responsible not just to help each other but also to bring the Word of God to bear on each other’s lives. This is clearer in questions 56–58.

Question 56—How is admonishing to be done? They should frequently, as occasion arises, admonish and exhort each other earnestly to put into practice, by God’s help, what they perceive ought to be done. By such admonition hearts are greatly strengthened in doing good, 1 Thess. 5:14; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24; Romans 5:14.

Question 57—How shall Christians exercise reproof? When they see their brethren sin, they should reprove them in kindness, meekness and love, show them their wrong and thereby try to win them over to amendment, Lev. 19:17; Prov. 24:24; Matt. 18:15; Gal. 1:1-2; Eph. 5:11; 1 Cor. 14:24-25.63

Here is a very telling turn for Spener. He expands the responsibility of the individual believer to admonishing, reproving, and comforting. He expands the role of the universal priesthood to the public realm without qualification.

Question 58 is an interesting one for two reasons. First, it introduces the idea of lay absolution. The job of the office is to provide absolution. Nevertheless, Spener allows for lay absolution in the case where the pastor is absent – much like Luther does:

Question 58—How ought they to comfort? When they are with troubled people, they should pronounce divine comfort to them, strengthen them as they are able. To this also pertains that in case of necessity when no regular ordained preacher is available (Luke 17:3-4; 2 Cor 2:10).64

63 Spener, Geistliche Priesterthum, PWS 626-628 (Voight, Spiritual Priesthood, 30). “56. Was ist bey der vermahnung zu thun? Das sie einander offt bey allerhand gelegenheiten ermahnen und auffmuntern dasjenige was sie nøthig zu seyn erkenneten in Göttlicher krafft mit Ernst zu werke zu richten: Durch welcherley vermahnungen die gemüther herrlich in dem guten gestärcket werden. 57. Wie haben sich aber die Christen deß straff-aments zu gebrauchen? Das sie ihr mitbrüder wo sie sie sündigen sehen mit freundlichkeit sanfftmutth und liebe deswegen straffen ihnen ihr unrecht zeigen und sie damit suchen zur besserung zu gewinnen.

64 Spener, Geistliche Priesterthum, PWS 626-628 (Voight, Spiritual Priesthood, 30). “58. Wie gehet sie das trösten an? Wo sie bey betrüben sind das sie ihnen Göttlichen trost zuspechen und sie nach vermögen auffrichten a. Wohin auch gehöret daß sie in dem fall der noth wo man keinen ordenlichen prediger haben kan auch den trost der vergebung der sünden oder absolution ertheilen mögen.
Second, it allows laypeople the ability to speak “words of divine comfort,” presumably to their friends and neighbors. Even the ability to speak these words is an expansion of the universal priesthood for Spener. The specific responsibility of hearing confession and providing words of absolution will be examined in the next section.

Spener was concerned to distinguish the public and private responsibilities of the universal priesthood and office of ministry. Examples of this are the *collegia pietatis* mentioned above. However, he envisioned a close relationship between the two. As stated above, these meetings would not take the place of customary services but would be additional to them. Here we return to the *Pia* to buttress the argument that Spener is making here in *Geistliche*. This aspect is key to my study, so an extended quotation is appropriate:

> One person would not rise to preach, but others who have been blessed with gifts and knowledge would also speak and present their pious opinions on the proposed subject to the judgment of the rest, doing all this in such a way as to avoid disorder and strife. This might conveniently be done by having several ministers meet together or by having several members of a congregation who have a fair knowledge of God or desire to increase their knowledge meet under the leadership of a minister, take up the Holy Scriptures, read aloud from them, and fraternally discuss each verse in order to discover its simple meaning and whatever may be useful for the edification of all. Anybody who is not satisfied with his understanding of a matter should be permitted to express his doubts and seek further explanation. On the other hand those (including ministers), who have made more progress should be allowed the freedom to state how they understand each passage. Then all that has been contributed, insofar as it accords with the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures, should be carefully considered by the rest, especially by the ordained ministers, and applied to the edification of the whole meeting. Everything should be arranged with an eye to the glory of God, to the spiritual growth of the participants and therefore also to their limitations. Any threat of meddlesomeness, quarrelsomeness, self-seeking, or something else of this sort should be guarded against and tactfully cut off especially by the preacher who retains leadership in these meetings.\(^{65}\)

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Following on the heels of Lutheran Orthodoxy, this quotation is remarkable. The Lutheran divines didn’t emphasize the universal priesthood, let alone the partnering of the priesthood with the minister. Second, the job of public reading of scripture was that of the office of ministry, not the universal priesthood. Spener wants everyone to read the Bible on their own, to comment on it, and even to help others understand it. What is even more interesting is the relationship between the clergy and the laypeople. The office of ministry is still necessary, but its responsibility is not to be the sole voice in interpretation. It might be the final voice in biblical interpretation, but it is not the only one. Another interesting point is the issue of maintaining order. Spener wants everyone to engage in a study of the Bible. Individual study of the Bible should be done in a God-honoring way (as in the *collegia pietatis*). The pastor is the leader of the meeting and should monitor the attitudes and hearts of those who are engaging in discussion.

The line between public and private can be blurry at times for Spener. The private realm is the realm for the universal priesthood. Each Christian has the

cognitione coelitus dotati, procul omnia ἀραξία et litigiis sermones suos miscerer, & super propositis materis sententiae pie conferrent, coeteri de auditis judicarent. Quod forte ista methodo non incommode fieret: si certo tempore ex ministrorum (ubi plures sunt) numero aliqui vel sub moderamine ministri plures auditorum, qui a DEO cognitione eximia instructi, vel professus in ea cupidi sunt, conveniant, scripturam sacram in manus verborum simplici & usu ad aedificationem nostram fraterne colloquantur: ita ut cuilibet, qui rem propositam non quantum sat est, intelligeret, dubia sua in medium proferendi, eorumque evolutionem petendi, illis vero quies ultei riores jam profectus fecissent, cum pastore; sensum suum de locis & rebus propositis libere proponendi facultas esset: tum proflata, quemadmodum Spiritus Sancti in scriptura sententiae convenirent, a coeteris, praecipue doctoribus publicis, examinatia convenirent, a coeteris, praecipue doctoribus publicis, examinarentur, atque ita totus coetus aedificaretur. Necesse vero esset, ut omnia decenti in gloriam divinam & spirituale auditium incrementum intentione suscipierent, & ad hoc limites isti scopo conformes definierunt, ubi vero litigandi lubido, περιεργια proprii honoris studium, similiesque ἐνοχητοι affectus institutum corrupturi apparerent, a coeteris, inprimus doctoribus, penes quos moderamen congregationis est . . . “

66 Spener uses the German *öffentlich* for “public” and *ampt* for “private.” This use of *ampt* does not appear in either Luther or Melanchthon.
responsibility of maintaining the spiritual development of his or her own household.

Interestingly, he then encourages Christians to expand their responsibilities out from under their own roof: “As if it were not proper for laymen diligently to study in the Word of the Lord, much less to instruct, admonish, chastise, and comfort their neighbors, or to do privately what pertains to the ministry publicly, in as much as all these things were supposed to belong only to the office of the minister.”67 Biblical study with one’s own family is private, but now it is extended to neighbors. This is much the same struggle I identified with Luther and his definition of public and private; the distinction is never fully clear. Spener does not provide any delimiter on “brethren.” When neighbors sin it is the Christian’s job to show them, by using God’s word, that they are wrong. They can teach them God’s word to stop them from sinning. The problem is that we do not know if Spener means one neighbor, two neighbors, ten neighbors, or more. Another quotation by Spener gives the definite impression that the sphere of each Christian is assumed to be larger than just his or her family or single neighbor.

No damage will be done to the ministry by a proper use of this priesthood. In fact, one of the principal reasons why the ministry cannot accomplish all that it ought is that it is too weak without the help of the universal priesthood. One man is incapable of doing all that is necessary for the edification of the many persons who are generally entrusted to his pastoral care. However, if the priests do their duty, the minister, as director and oldest brother, has splendid assistance in the performance of his duties and his public and private acts, and thus his burden will not be too heavy.68

67 Spener, Pia Desideria, PSS 1:205 (Tappert, Pia Desideria, 93). “Tanquam horum munericis non esset in ‘verbo Domini meditandae, diligenter versari, multo minus alio juxta se instruere, hortari, corripere, consolari, eaque privatim agree, quae ministeris ut publice agant, incumbent, sed ista ex ipsorum functione solummodo pendere.”

68 Spener, Pia Desideria, PSS 1:207 (Tappert, Pia Desideria, 94). “Nam legitimo usu hujus sacerdotii tam non ministerio remora injicitur: ut haec ex praecipuis causis sit, quare ministerium non omnia, quae fieri decebat, execui & opei mandare posit, quia id videlicet absque ope hujus communis sacerdotii infirmius, nec unus vir sufficiens est, apud tam multos, quam communiter unius curae
A last quotation from *Spiritual Priesthood* will help us understand what Spener means by “public” and “private”:

Question 63—May a number also meet together for such a purpose? They may mutually edify each other when occasion brings them together. In the same way it cannot be wrong if several good friends sometimes meet by appointment to go over a sermon together, read the Scriptures, and to confer in the fear of the Lord how they may put into practice what they read. Only the gatherings should not be large, so as not to have the appearance of a separation and a public assembly.⁶⁹

This quotation indicates that the distinction between public and private falls squarely in the eye of the beholder. I will offer practical application of this in the next section as we examine the place of confession and absolution, the universal priesthood, the place of justification, and the nature of the church.

**Quasimodogeniti Sermons**

Spener’s confessional writings further reveal his understanding of the universal priesthood. His *Quasimodogeniti* sermons specifically will help us understand what Spener is teaching at a popular level as he preaches daily and weekly.

Spener immediately introduces a unique concept. The use of the keys is given its own office: “Das amt der versöhnung” or “office (or ministry) of reconciliation.”⁷⁰

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⁷⁰ Spener, PSS, III, 857.
does not make a one-to-one identification between this office and the office of ministry or the preaching office. The office of ministry is to engage in binding and loosing, but this new office is broader than this.

He also does not equate the office of reconciliation with the universal priesthood. Nevertheless Spener allows for laypeople to exercise the keys, quoting Matthew 18:35, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” Spener allows the seeking of absolution from a fellow “brüder.” The universal priesthood now to have confession and absolution as a responsibility.

Concerning the office of reconciliation, Spener offers seven lehrpuncten, or teaching points: (1) Along with salvation, Christ has given this office to everyone; (2) Christ gave this (reconciliation) to teach about grace; (3) both offices (reconciliation and ministry) go hand in hand in dealing with sin; (4) this reconciliation and forgiveness is in all offices and should be taught; (5) speaking reconciliation and forgiveness is a thing to be treasured; (6) the Word of God contains reconciliation and forgiveness, so focus on God’s Word; and (7) this Word is enough. Satisfaction is not necessary. All seven points are very telling. There is much agreement between Luther and Spener here. Both emphasize the importance of confession, its connectedness to God’s Word, and the ability of all Christians to hear words of confession and provide absolution.

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71 Spener does not even mention the universal priesthood directly.

72 Holy Bible, NIV.

73 Spener, PSS, III, 863.

74 Philip Spener, Schriften III, 3, 862-863.
Spener never directly mentions the universal priesthood in his *Quasimodogeniti* sermons but rather spends most of his time developing the “office of reconciliation.” Perhaps Spener assumes the universal priesthood and it is always functioning in the background of his thinking. This is a fair statement given his proposals in the *Pia* and *Das geistliche Priesterthum*.

Spener and Confession and Absolution

Luther and Spener share similarities on the doctrine of the universal priesthood. They both believe that the universal priesthood is valuable, even essential, to the life of the church. They both see the ability of the universal priesthood to reach beyond its private realm and participate in the public forum.³⁵ Lastly, allow and expect lay confession and absolution. These similarities are tempered by some of the differences.

Spener’s critique starts with the late sixteenth-century practices of confession and absolution. Spener lamented the abuses that confronted him and his fellow pastors “in that most often nothing happens [in confessional] other than that a penitent thoughtlessly utters a memorized [confessional] formula, the content of which he sometimes does not even understand, which in fact does not even apply to this person in any way.”³⁶ Spener and the pastors really had no idea if the individuals knew either that they were forgiven or

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³⁵ I would say that Luther emphasizes this more than Spener. Nevertheless, it is clearly in Spener.

³⁶ Philip Spener, *Gründlicher Unterricht von dem Ammte der Versöhnung, und insonderheit von der in der Evangelischen Kirche gebräuchlichen Privat-Absolution; in unterschiedlichen Predigten vorgestellt* (Frankfurt am Mayn: Zunnerisch-und lungischem Buchladen, 1716), 297. “Indem meistentheils nichts weiter geschiehet als daß einerseits das beicht-kind eine außwendig gelernte formul die es manchmal nicht ver- steht was damit gesagt seye ja die sich offt auff die person in vielen stücken gar nicht schicket her erzehlet ohne dran zu gedencken”; “Indem die beichtstühle meistens also gebauet daß beicht-vatter und beicht-kind nicht gegeneinander ihr hertz also außschütten können wie sichs geziemet ohne daß andere es auch hören und gewahr werden”
from what they were forgiven. Spener also wasn’t sure of the number of pastors available. Further, he was not confident in their ability to even oversee a confession. He felt compelled to train new pastors to handle the task correctly.77

Spener’s critique then turns to the confessional chairs (beichtstuhls). He does not believe the way the chairs are arranged to be conducive to confession. Confessional chairs were built in such a way that the confessor and the penitent were unable to communicate with each other without others being able to hear. Spener envisioned this confession taking place in a free form spiritual conversation in which the pastor-confessor was expected to “pour out [his] heart” as much as the penitent. He wanted to preserve individual confession and absolution, but in a new form and emphasis.

There is one incident that sheds further light on Spener’s understanding of absolution and its role in the church. The incident is referred to as the Der Berliner Beichstuhlstreit (“the Berlin confessional controversy”). The controversy surrounded the use of private versus general or public confession. Spener was called to be the rector at St. Nicholas’ Church in Berlin in 1691, where Johann Casper Schade (one of Spener’s most ardent followers) was the pastor.78 Schade was an extremely popular pastor in Berlin and he was given a wide range of latitude in his teaching and administration.79 As early as 1693 Schade questioned the role and significance of private confession in the

77 Ibid.
79 This latitutude seems to have gotten him into trouble in the case of the discipline of two young girls in his parish. See Helmost Obst, Der Berliner Beichstuhlstreit: Die Kritik Des Pietismus and Der Beichtpraxis Der Lutherischen Orthodoxie (Witten: Luther-Verlag, 1973), 47–49.
church. He believed that there was no reason for private confession, primarily because it was not biblical.\textsuperscript{80} Schade preached publicly against the use of private confession and consequently abolished it in the church in 1695.\textsuperscript{81} Those who came for confession for the Lord’s Supper were given “only a confessional sermon and absolution as a group.”\textsuperscript{82}

This very public stand on private versus general confession forced Spener, as rector, to respond. On August 7, Spener responded to Schade’s sermon with his own, “Des Beichtwesens in der Evangelischen Kirchen rechter Gebrauch und Mißbrauch.”\textsuperscript{83} Spener affirms that confession as such is essential: “It is the case even with divine ordinances, no less than with other good things, that they are good or not good for human beings depending on how they are used. The gospel, in itself, is holy and good.”\textsuperscript{84}

Fundamentally, Spener supported Schade, but in a qualified sense.\textsuperscript{85} They both had similar concerns. They agreed on what the content of confession should be, but they differed on the form that it needed to take. As seen above, Schade believed that his approach to public confession brought conditional absolution to those who were in attendance. Spener, as seen above, viewed it more as a conversation between the penitent

\textsuperscript{80} This is suggested by Lang, “Private Confession,” 256, but he does not cite where Spener actually says this.

\textsuperscript{81} Obst, \textit{Der Berliner}, 22.

\textsuperscript{82} Lang, “Private Confession,” 256.

\textsuperscript{83} Philip Spener, \textit{Des Beichtwesens in der Evangelischen Kirchen rechter Gebrauch Mißbrauch} (Michael Rudiger: Berlin, 1695).

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 11. “So ists nicht weniger mit andern guten dingen. Auch gottlichen ordnungen bewandt. Das sie je nach dem sie gebraucht werden. Dem menschen gut oder nicht gut sind. Das Evangelium ist an sich heilig und gut.”

\textsuperscript{85} Obst, \textit{Der Berliner}, 24.
and the confessor. Spener was merely reacting to Schade’s very public statements on confession. Spener and Schade believed that though it was only an ecclesiastical ordinance, and not a divine institution, it should not be banned. The practice should be required before the Lord’s Supper and on regular basis.\textsuperscript{86} Despite their differences, Schade and Spener did agree on what needed to be kept and what should be eliminated within their inheritance from Lutheran Orthodoxy: “For Schade and Spener, repentance and catechism retained their importance, but private confession and secular legitimation were no longer essential to their Christianizing project.”\textsuperscript{87}

Spener and Luther agree to a great extent on lay absolution and confession. The biggest and most profound difference between Spener and Luther was their understanding of the role of the word of God in confession and absolution. I laid out Luther’s position on confession in chapter 4, but it is appropriate to review it here. Confession and absolution depended entirely on the word of God. The spiritual status of the confessor was of no importance. Further, absolution is not the product of the penitent. Full contrition is impossible and unnecessary. Luther’s confession occurred \textit{coram Christi}, the minister served only as Christ’s mouthpiece. The word does it all for Luther.

Spener’s approach to confession and absolution is more introspective. He is keen to ensure that those who do repent do so in an effective way. Spener has a checklist for recognizing true repentance. This true repentance can be recognized in eleven steps: (1)

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{87} Venables, “Repentance and Confession,” 14.
Hatred of sin; (2) desire to amend one’s life; (3) faith in Jesus; (4) vow to be obedient; (5) sorrow for the offense; (6) knowledge that one has earned damnation; (7) shame before the heavenly father; (8) desire for the grace of Christ; (9) the putting away of all sin that has been discovered; (10) the resolute carrying out of all rules of the Christian life, and (11) the acknowledgment that the Holy Spirit has led one to do this.  

The contrast between Luther and Spener is clear. Spener’s desire is to protect repentance and make sure it is genuine. Luther thought strictures such as these were too much: “The priest therefore has enough sign and reason to absolve in that one desires to receive absolution. He is not bound to know any more.” As is well put in Krispin’s article, Spener felt duty-bound to know more.

Spener’s absolution is based on the words of the penitent and subject to the eleven requirements above. He explains, “Indeed, someone might say, the absolution is nevertheless God’s Word, which must be true; and I believe it in faith, so I also receive its power. The absolution is in itself God’s word, which itself cannot deceive, but its application to you, if you are unrepentant, is a human error.” Luther and Spener believe that the word of God is present and functioning, but in very different ways.

88 Ibid., 11.

89 Martin Luther, *Appellatio M. Lutheri A Caietano ad Papam (1518)*, WA 2:26–28 “Auch hatt der priester gnugsam zeychenn unnd ursach, zu absolvirenn, wan er siht, das man vonn yhm begeret der absolutione. Hocher ist er zu wissen nit vorbundenn.”

90 Krispin, “Philip,” 11.

91 Philip Spener, *Gründlicher Unterricht von dem Ammte der Versöhnung, und insonderheit von der in der Evangelischen Kirche gebräuchlichen Privat-Absolution; in unterschiedlichen Predigten vorgestellt* (Frankfurt am Mayn: Zunnerisch-und lungischem Buchladen, 1716). “Also bekennten sie freylich sie lebten nicht wie sie solten begehrten sich auch dessen nich zu befleißigen aber Christus habe darzu den beichstuhl verordnet und seinen Aposteln und allen predigern befohlen die sünde denjenigen die
In summary, Spener sees the value of confession, absolution, and the ability of the universal priesthood to hear confession and provide absolution. Absolution can be provided by a public act of the office of ministry as well as a public act by the universal priesthood. Where we begin to see a difference between Luther and Spener is in the nature of confession and absolution itself: should it be seen as a work of God or a work of human power?

Spener and Justification, Absolution, and the Theology of the Cross

Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed . . . On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and this work. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise, all is lost.92

This quotation from the Smalcald Articles evidences how important justification was for Luther; to stay true to the Gospel, one must hold fast to justification. Justification meant that one’s status was guaranteed not by the individual’s effort in contrition, enumerating sins, and so on. Forgiveness comes as a result of the application of the objective Word of God. The guarantee shifts in Spener. Central weight does not fall on the objective Word of God but on actions of the absolved individuals under the power of the Holy Spirit.93 As Lindberg points out, Word and Spirit are united indivisibly with one another in Luther. Spener’s de-emphasis of the objective, spoken Word of God is 

92 Melanchthon, Smalcald Articles, "Second Part", 5, BekS 415–16 (BoC 301). “De hoc articulo cedere aut aliiquid contra illum largiri aut permittere nemo piorum potest, etiamsi coelum et terra ac omnia corruant. Et in hoc articulo sita sunt et consistent omnia quae contra papam, diabolum et mundum in vita nostra docemus, testamur et agimus. Quare oportet nos de has doctrina esse certos et minime dubitare, alioquin actum est prorsus.”

93 Lindberg, Pietist, 173.
replaced by the experience through the Spirit and consequent overcoming of radical doubt.\textsuperscript{94} Lindberg is correct in pointing out that the discussion of faith itself is overcome by a discussion of the quality of faith and its accomplishment. Centrally, there is a shift of emphasis from \textit{extra nos} to \textit{in nos}.

Pietism’s displacement (or perhaps reorientation) of justification by \textit{Wiedergeburt} evidences a shift from a theocentric to anthropocentric orientation. In Luther’s theocentric model, it is God that makes the move toward humanity, toward sinners. As Lindberg points out, this was in opposition to the medieval and Reformation spiritualists’ model of humanity’s, or the sinner’s, \textit{ascent} to God. Spener’s model does not oppose, attempts to combine the two orientations. Humanity can, should, and is even expected by God to move toward perfection: “Let no one think that we here intend and see too much. . . To those who raise this kind of objection I reply thus: First, we are not forbidden to seek perfection, but we are urged towards it.”\textsuperscript{95} Spener tempers his words by stating that complete perfection is impossible in this world, but that believers are required and able to reach some level of perfection. Spener then defines what he means by perfection:

We do not understand the perfection which we demand of the church in such a way that not a single hypocrite is any longer to be found in it, for we know that there is no field of grain in which there are no weeds. What we mean is that the church should be free of manifest offenses, that nobody who is afflicted with such failing should be allowed to remain in the church without fitting reproof and ultimately exclusion, and that true members of the church should be richly filled with many fruits of the faith.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{95} Spener, \textit{Pia Desideria}, PSS 1:181 (Tappert, 80). “Nec est, quod quis cogitet, nimia nos quarere vel intendere . . . ut quaramus perfectionem, tam non est vetitum, ut etiam id facere jubeamur.”

\textsuperscript{96} Spener, \textit{Pia Desideria}, PSS 183, (Tappert, 81). “Hanc vero perfectionem, quam Ec’clesiae desideramus, non eo extendimus ut nullus in ea hypocrita supersit, gnari, agrum tritici nunquam ita purum
This passage contains no sense of Luther’s classic *simul iustus et peccator*. Spener is concerned with spiritual progression from one point to another as evidenced in ethical behavior. Lindberg explains,

Rebirth thus signifies a higher nature and quality of being. Luther . . . remains with an ongoing battle between the old and new man which is never transformed into a visible victory on earth. Victory always remains the judgment of God, not the possibility of the Christian. The dynamic of Pietism was not Luther’s dialectic of law and Gospel, sin and grace, damnation and faith, but rather development of the power of faith in renewal and good works.  

The role that the objective work of justification plays in absolution cannot be over-emphasized. Spener and Luther agree on the importance of absolution, but the nature of it is fundamentally different.

**Spener and the Nature of the Church**

The difference between Luther and Spener on the nature of absolution is related to other differences in matters such as ecclesiology. Two specific areas need to be examined. First, what are the true marks of the church? Second, what is the nature of the individuals who make up the church? Specifically, does Spener create substrata of believers based on their progress toward “perfection”?

According to Luther, the church is made up of individuals who are saints. Individual believers are not just individuals; they make up what Luther refers to as the *communio sanctorum*, or communion of the saints. Every Christian is a saint as he or she is justified and made perfect by God through faith and trust in Christ, whether dead or

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esse, ut non aliquid Zizaniorum tritico admistrum deprehendatur: sed ut ab ea manifesta scandala exulent, qui vero his contaminati sunt, disciplina necessaria afficiantur & tandem excludanture, vera autem membra copiosis fructibus abundanter impleantur.”

alive.\textsuperscript{98} All are saints through the sacrifice of Christ; so also all Christians are sinners: *simul iustus et peccator.* There is not one who is spiritually “better” than another. Each believer participates in the community based on the same simultaneous gift and task, grace and calling.\textsuperscript{99} Some Christians in the community have weaker faith than others. Luther claims that God allows some to have weaker faith so that other may have the opportunity to demonstrate their evangelical brotherly concern for them.\textsuperscript{100} Strong believers should not use their brothers’ or sisters’ weakness as a chance to feed their own self-confidence.\textsuperscript{101}

Progress and perfection are two key concepts for Spener’s understanding of the Christian life and the life of the church. Lindberg points out that Spener’s conventicles are both Pietism’s strength and its weakness: “The conventicle posed the possibility of creating two classes of Christians: the normal ‘churchgoers’ and the ‘better’ Christians of the ‘ecclesiola in ecclesia.’”\textsuperscript{102} All might be sinners, but the distinction is how fast some are progressing compared to others. The goal or purpose of the church is to cultivate “perfect” Christians, and the church is the mechanism by which Christians move toward perfection. A part of perfection for Spener includes serving one’s neighbor and representing Christ, but it is the context of perfection that becomes problematic. Lindberg sees a concern for the individual, but whether this concern for the individual precludes

\begin{footnotes}
\item[98] Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1966), 298.
\item[99] Ibid., 305.
\item[100] Martin Luther, *In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas M. Lutheri commentarius* (1519), WA 2:598 (LW 27:383).
\item[101] WA 2:598 (LW 27:383).
\item[102] Lindberg, *Pietist*, 171.
\end{footnotes}
the development of a social ethic is open to debate. Ecclesiology for Spener is defined in ethical terms of the progress of the individual.

This idea of progress has an impact on the eschatology of the church as well. Spener’s teleological orientation is toward the “new individual” with the goal of perfection. Eschatologically speaking, God’s promise then becomes what Lindberg refers to as a “contemporary reality” at some level. However, Luther’s *simul iustus et peccator* does not allow for a realized eschatology at any level. God’s work has begun, but will not be finished until the second coming of Christ. Perfection at any level is an impossibility.

Spener and Luther Summary

There is a great amount of common ground between Luther and Spener on the doctrine of the universal priesthood. The role of absolution in the universal priesthood represents some of that common ground. Each of them sees a place for the universal priesthood to be confessor to his or her neighbor and to have the ability (not just in emergencies) to provide absolution.

Despite their consensus, there are deep-seated differences between the two. Spener’s emphasis on the subjectivity of the Word of God puts him squarely at odds with Luther’s emphasis on the objectivity of the Word. This extends to their understanding of absolution. Luther believes that absolution is the objective work of God and takes place regardless of the “status” of the one seeking absolution. Spener is the opposite – he sees a

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103 Ibid.
104 Ibid., 142, 177.
105 Ibid, 165.
significant role for the individual in absolution. As seen above, Spener believes that true repentance, and therefore absolution, isn’t accomplished until an individual goes through the eleven steps that he considers to be essential. The effort of the individual plays a significant role. This is the opposite of Luther’s.

Spener and Luther fundamentally disagree as to the “telos” of each believer. Perfection in this life is possible, according to Spener. Luther rejects this with his maxim *simul iustus et peccator* (“simultaneously justified and sinner”). There is no “path to perfection” for Luther. Perfection will come in the second coming of Jesus Christ.

A last point of disagreement comes with Spener’s *collegia pietatis*, or *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*, or “conventicles.” As seen above, these are small groups gathered for the purpose of edification and learning. There is nothing like this in Luther’s writing or praxis. The idea of creating a church within a church would present different problems for Luther. A potential problem can be seen in the ability to delineate between “public” and “private” gatherings.

Spener’s believes he is simply building on Luther’s traditional understanding of the universal priesthood. Spener’s own work makes it clear that this is not the case. There is a radical departure from Luther that sets a completely separate trajectory for Lutheranism and the birth of Pietism. This chapter builds on and reflects these facts.

In the last chapter, I will lay out some of the implications of this trajectory and what we can learn from the differences between Luther and Spener. Contemporary applications are wide ranging in both the theological and sociological realms.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Review

I set out to investigate the changes in the doctrine of the universal priesthood and absolution from Luther’s death in 1546 to the publication of Philip Spener’s *Pia Desideria* in 1675. From the outset I sought to answer two key questions. First, how does the character of absolution change from Luther to Spener? Second, how does that change affect the doctrine of the universal priesthood? I have argued that the fundamental change in the nature of absolution in Spener’s theology is significant and leads to a radically different understanding of the universal priesthood as well.

Luther consistently asserted throughout his writings that absolution had nothing to do with either the penitent or the confessor; rather, the work of absolution was accomplished through the word of God alone. For Spener, absolution was dependent on the effort of the individual sinner. This change in the nature of absolution changed the nature of the universal priesthood. Neither a pastor nor a layperson was needed any longer to provide absolution, as the individual was able to achieve absolution by himself or herself. This muted the importance of the universal priesthood in Spener, no matter how much he wanted to emphasize the priesthood of the laity otherwise.

I came to this conclusion by tracing both absolution and the universal priesthood from the Middle Ages onward. Early in his career Luther “rediscovered” the doctrine of the universal priesthood out of medieval and patristic precedents. He transformed this doctrine with his own distinctive reading of biblical texts. Luther’s discovery was that the universal priesthood had the same priestly responsibilities of the office of ministry – although the
universal priesthood practiced these in private rather than in public. The one key exception we find to this restriction is in absolution. Luther affirms the ability of any Christian to provide words of absolution to another Christian (see chapter 4). But if lay people can speak words of absolution to other Christians, what is the nature of that absolution? Does absolution depend on the contrition of the penitent or the spiritual status of the confession, as in the Middle Ages? Luther contends instead that absolution depends solely on the word of God, the promise of forgiveness that God gives. Since absolution is completely dependent on the promise of God, anyone could pronounce absolution.

The doctrines of both absolution and the universal priesthood become less important in both Melanchthon and the Lutheran orthodox theologians. All of them are concerned with the codification of Luther’s doctrine over against theological alternatives (the process of confessionalization) and in the midst of political and social upheaval, culminating in the Thirty Years’ War. The shifting emphasis on absolution and the universal priesthood, even amid appeals to Luther’s teaching and authority can be seen in such theologians as Johann Arndt and Johann Dannhauer.

Philip Spener, the father of Pietism, sees himself as carrying on the doctrine of the universal priesthood of Luther after over a century of neglect by the theologians of Lutheran Orthodoxy. The doctrine of the universal priesthood was emphasized in writings such as the *Pia Desideria* and *Das Geistliche Priesterthum*. This emphasis is consistent with Luther’s emphasis on the universal priesthood over a century earlier. But for Spener, absolution has become something fundamentally different. He didn’t believe that mere words of absolution were efficient for forgiveness. Spener identified eleven steps that led to and evidenced true repentance (see chapter 6). Absolution was accomplished by human effort and not by the
word of anyone, whether laity or clergy. This was the exact opposite of what Luther concluded about both doctrines. The stark contrast between Luther and Spener on this topic provides the apex of the argument I have presented in this dissertation that absolution and the universal priesthood are radically different for the two figures. Consequently, Spener cannot be seen without serious qualification as carrying on Luther’s tradition in this area.

Nonetheless, both Luther and Spener do share certain common difficulties in the articulation of their different doctrines of absolution and priesthood. The first is the distinction between “public” and “private.” As I pointed out above, many times it is unclear whether Luther and Spener are dealing with public acts that belong to the office of ministry or with private acts of Christians. This is highlighted when both Luther and Spener encourage individuals to instruct their families and neighbors in Bible teaching. This would appear to be a public act, but Luther and Spener don’t indicate if it is one or the other. Spener brings serious challenges to the application of “public” vs. “private” with his *Collegia Pietatis*. The gathering of individuals, even with the pastor present, blurs the line between what is “public” and “private.” This same problem occurs with Luther when he encourages a neighbor to reproach another about his or her sin; this is the responsibility of the pastor. Once again, the distinction between “public” and “private” is blurred. These ambiguities have been allowed to stand in my exposition of Luther and Spener’s positions.

Another problem, related to the first, is the relationship between the office of ministry and universal priesthood. While Luther spends a great deal of time distinguishing between the two, Spener does not. In the *Pia Desideria* Spener rarely
mentions the office of ministry. When they are mentioned it is in the context of the
*collegia pietatis*. Pastors may be present in these gatherings, but are not the sole speakers
or interpreters.

Questions for Further Investigation

There is copious room for further research on this topic as a problem in historical
theology. I limited my study to the role of absolution in the life of the universal
priesthood. Luther lists at least seven other responsibilities of the priesthood. Each of
these could be examined in turn to develop a fuller understanding of the connection
between Luther and Spener. Another topic that would be fruitful to be explore is
Spener’s understanding of Luther’s theology of the cross, which Spener does not address
in either the *Pia Desideria* or the *Spiritual Priesthood*, though a closer study of Spener’s
sermons might shed light on his understanding of the *theologia crucis* and the doctrine of
justification. Other topics have been explored by previous studies but no final conclusion
has been reached. For Luther, does his amplification of the theology of the office of
ministry later in life (from 1530 onward) mean a necessary reduction of lay involvement
in the church? Lastly, Timothy Wengert has claimed in his book *Priesthood, Pastors,
and Bishops* that there is no such thing as the universal priesthood in Luther.¹ My
findings here challenge that conclusion. Does the theological relationship between Spener
and Luther described here cast light on how such divergent readings are possible? Is what
Wengert really shows that *Spener’s* doctrine of the priesthood is not to be found in
Luther.

¹ Wengert, 1-33.
Contemporary Questions

Further, how can understanding both Luther and Spener’s doctrines of universal priesthood and of absolution impact the church today? While these questions fall outside the scope of this paper, it would be valuable to research them further. First, the emergent/emerging church movement is a postmodern movement that highlights lay activity and responsibility (Bible reading, prayer, etc). Can Spener’s description of the collegia pietatis help the movement retain its desire to diminish hierarchy while retaining some role for the office of ministry? Second, can Luther’s emphasis on the responsibilities of laypeople in each church spur local churches to equip people for service? Luther is very specific about the marks of a true church, including the office of ministry whose primary task it is to “preach” the Word of God. Can Luther’s marks of a true church and the insistence that the office of ministry communicate the Gospel challenge to churches to raise the value of biblical teaching in congregational life? Finally, is absolution being practiced in these churches; and could these churches be informed by Luther or Spener’s understanding of lay absolution? How is Luther’s or Spener’s doctrine of the universal priesthood informing both the emergent churches’ rejection of metanarratives and their communal rather than hierarchical structures of authority? According to Luther, would they be considered churches at all?

Confession is ubiquitous in our culture; this is especially true of popular culture. Reality television gives the viewer a “first hand” view of all that a group of people says,

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2 There are many studies on the subject: Dan Kimball, The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); Scot McKnight, Church in the Present Tense: A Candid Look at What’s Emerging (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011).
do, don’t do, and reveal about themselves. Often what is revealed in a “confession” (intentional or not) is uncomfortable; we don’t know how to process it. I would suggest that this practice of public “confession” suggests a larger felt need for confession.

Protestants by and large are silent on confession, be it public or private. Perhaps a more robust application of confession and absolution would aid in this problem.

Lastly, we are a culture that is permeated with shame.³ One of the greatest tools for dealing with shame is providing an environment for individuals to talk about or confess their shame. These discussions can ultimately lead to hearing words of absolution if necessary.

A last contemporary application addresses the relationship between Pietism and evangelicalism. Several studies examine the influence of Pietism on modern day evangelicalism.⁴ Does the decrease in power for pastors in the Pietist tradition—as evident in the *collegia pietatis* and the role of laity alongside pastors in Pietism, and the ability of lay Christians to achieve absolution on their own through Spener’s eleven point plan—carry over to the evangelical tradition? Each of these topics would both be illuminated by the present study and shed further light on its themes.

Aside from the application of these themes to contemporary society, I believe these should be identified as central to the life of the church as a whole. There are two specific themes that should be brought to the forefront. The first is the centrality of the


power of the word of God in church life. Luther believed that all faith revolves around the objective power of that word. As churches focus on the center of the word it stays theocentric vs. anthropocentric – depending on God and not merely on man. The second central element that emerges from this study is the importance of each baptized Christian’s vocation. The absence of a character indebilis allows each Christian’s daily work to have an impact on the kingdom of God, especially through Bible reading, prayer, and providing absolution for other lay Christians. Churches that free up their laypeople to serve in the church will inevitably see an expansion of ministry and impact in their community. One area in particular is that of missions. Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood opens the doors to lay Christians being a part of missions work throughout the world.
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