
Universal Priesthood of All Believers: Unfulfilled Promise of the Reformation

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Martin Luther's teaching about the universal priesthood of all believers remains an unfulfilled promise of the Reformation. If justification and vocation are the twin pillars¹ of the Lutheran Reformation, the bearers of this legacy over the centuries have granted prominent place to justification, while at the same time relegating vocation to a marginal position, never fulfilling the promise of Luther's teaching about the universal priesthood. Instead of developing the fulsome potential of Luther's theology of vocation in tandem with justification, the universal priesthood of all believers lived out in the arenas of their daily lives has remained on the margins.

Justification belongs to the heart of Luther's own Reformation breakthrough as he discovered the power of grace in Jesus Christ: "...they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24). Justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone has been rightly articulated and defended as the article upon which "stands all that we teach and practice..."² Justification has been granted central place in unprecedented ecumenical breakthroughs, especially with the Roman Catholic Church at the signing of the monumental *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.³ Justification

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1. Cf. Mark Tranvik, *Martin Luther and the Called Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 164.

2. Martin Luther, "Smalcald Articles," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 301 (II.5). Cf. also LW 14:37.

3. The Lutheran World Federation and The Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

rightly belongs at the center of the observances of the Reformation anniversary.

At the same time, it is imperative to declare that this same Reformation tradition repeatedly has failed organically to connect the doctrine of justification with living out the Christian life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer analyzed this deficit in his classic book, *Discipleship*, when he described the victory of "cheap grace" at the expense of following Jesus Christ:

Like ravens we have gathered around the carcass of cheap grace. From it we have imbibed the poison which has killed the following of Jesus among us. The doctrine of pure grace experienced an unprecedented deification. The pure doctrine of grace became its own God, grace itself. Luther's teachings are quoted everywhere, but twisted from their truth into self-delusion. They say if only our church is in possession of a doctrine of justification, then it is surely a justified church! They say Luther's true legacy should be recognizable in making grace as cheap as possible. Being Lutheran should mean that discipleship is left to the legalists, the Reformed, or the enthusiasts, all for the sake of grace....A people became Christian, became Lutheran, but at the cost of discipleship, at an all-too-cheap price. Cheap grace had won.⁴

A single-minded focus on justification introduced an interruption between faith and good works that has been the Achilles heel of Lutheran theology over the centuries.⁵ Addressing this deficit becomes one of the great opportunities at the 500th an-

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, eds. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 53. Efforts to address the gap between justification and good works have punctuated the history of Lutheran theology: third use of the law, the Pietist reaction to Orthodoxy, Bonhoeffer's focus on costly grace, and William Lazareth's proposal of a "second use of the Gospel." The most promising current proposal is that of the Finnish school of Luther research led by Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, ed. and trans. Kirsi Irmeli Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

5. Craig L. Nesson, "The Relation of Justification and Sanctification in the Lutheran Tradition," in Al Truesdale, ed., *All Things Needed for Godliness: A 'Catholic' Portrait of Christian Holiness* (Kansas City: Foundry Publishing, 2018).

niversary of the Reformation. The solution of this centuries-old problem, however, does not depend so much on new theological formulations linking justification to discipleship (as valuable as these might be) but by retrieving Luther's robust understanding of vocation and giving prominence to the universal priesthood of all believers in organic relationship to the doctrine of justification.

Jürgen Moltmann affirms vocation as "the third great insight of the Reformation" after word and sacrament.⁶ When Luther undertook the deconstruction of the "three walls" built to defend the power of the late medieval Roman Catholic Church—ecclesial claims to superiority over temporal power, ecclesial claims to authority above the interpretation of Scripture, and excessive claims to papal authority—he did so to recover the equal status of all the baptized alongside priests, bishops, and popes: "This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people."⁷ Luther elaborated the extent of this equality:

To put it still more clearly: suppose a group of earnest Christian 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 [person] would be as truly a priest as though he had been ordained by all the bishops and popes in the world. That is why in cases of necessity anyone can baptize and give absolution. This would be impossible if we were not all priests.⁸

The necessary point is not about diminishing the service of pastors as ministers of word and sacrament. Pastors have a crucial calling in a theology of ministry oriented toward the ministry of the baptized. My point is specifically about *the equal status of all Christian individuals* by virtue of baptism and baptism alone.⁹ The central claim: *baptism is the primary ordination of all Christians*. Therefore, the retrieval of a robust understanding of vocation is urgently needed to reform the church in service to neighbors for the life of the world and integrity of creation.

The gospel of Jesus Christ: Freedom for baptismal vocation in the arenas of daily life

Luther's construction of the universal priesthood began as an attack on elevated status claimed for the offices of priest and

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bishop. "In this way, Luther rejected the notion of a twofold priesthood: a spiritual and an external priesthood. For Luther, there exists only one priesthood: the spiritual priesthood."¹⁰ The responsibility of serving as a teacher of the word belongs to all Christians. While the community designates particular people to the "external priesthood" for the sake of church order, to preach and administer sacraments by a public call, this is not an elevation to a higher, godlier status.

Thus we all, as I have said before, have become priest's children through baptism. Therefore it should be understood that the name "priest" ought to be the common possession of believers just as much as the name "Christian" or "Child of God."¹¹

God grants freedom to all followers of Christ, "so that all of us should proclaim God's Word and works at every time and in every place, and persons from all ranks, races, and stations may be specially called to the ministry, if they have the grace and the understanding of Scriptures to teach others."¹²

Nathan Montover summarizes Luther's views on the universal priesthood according to the following themes: 1) sometimes it serves as an attack on the authority of the pope (as against the "three walls"), 2) the ministry of the ordained is to be limited so that it remains a service to, not lordship over, all, 3) it is a call "for renewed commitment to Christian life," and 4) on occasion it "is used as a tool for understanding—or influencing—the political realm."¹³

The key text for interpreting a proper understanding of the relationship between justification and vocation in Luther's thought is *The Freedom of a Christian*. The two central theses upon which Luther constructs his understanding of Christian freedom are:

A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything.
A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all.¹⁴

6. Jürgen Moltmann, "Reformation and Revolution," in *Martin Luther and the Modern Mind*, ed. Manfred Hoffmann, Toronto Studies in Theology 22 (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellon, 1985), 86; cited by Kathryn Kleinhans, "The Work of a Christian: Vocation in Lutheran Perspective," *Word and World* 25 (Fall 2005): 395.

7. Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German People* (1520), trans. Charles M. Jacobs, LW 44:127.

8. LW 44:128.

9. Cf. Timothy J. Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops: Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 7–8.

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10. Nathan Montover, *Luther's Revolution: The Political Dimensions of Martin Luther's Universal Priesthood* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2011), 56.

11. Martin Luther, "Commentary on Psalm 110," in LW 13:330–331, as cited by Montover, 62.

12. Martin Luther, "Sermon at the Dedication of Castle Church, Torgau," in LW 51:335, as cited by Montover, 63.

13. Montover, 64–65.

14. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), trans. and

Both assertions need to be fully appropriated both in their distinctness and in their complementary relationship to one another.

The first thesis articulates the power of the Gospel to set the Christian free *from* everything that prevents us from living as the people God created us to be. In his explanation to *Small Catechism*, Luther described Christ's gifts as freedom "from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death."¹⁵

In *The Freedom of a Christian* Luther elaborates on how this happens as faith unites the soul with Christ, described as the sweet exchange: "Christ is full of grace, life and salvation while the soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith enter the picture and sins, death, and damnation are Christ's while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's. For if Christ is a bridegroom he must take upon himself that which are his bride's, and he in turn bestows on her all that is his."¹⁶ Christian freedom originates with the work of Christ whose gospel sets Christians totally and entirely free from every form of bondage that enslaves them. This grounds Christian vocation in the doctrine of justification central to Lutheran theology.

The first thesis, however, is not complete without the second thesis as its inseparable companion. Without the connection of the first with the second thesis, as Bonhoeffer argued, grace becomes cheap and discipleship undermined. Because the Christian is free from sin, death, and the devil, Christians do not need to worry or be preoccupied about their status or worth in relationship to God. For Christ's sake, we are the beloved ones of God. Our sins are forgiven, therefore we need no longer be troubled about our inherent worth or dignity in relationship to God. Christ is raised from the dead and bestows the gift of resurrection life, therefore we need not be preoccupied with our eternal destiny. The devil, the captivating force behind human bondage, cannot prevail over us for Christ's sake, therefore we no longer need submit to any form of external control.

Exactly because Christ sets us free from all things that sever our relationship with God, now our attention can be redirected from preoccupation with what God thinks about us to focus instead on what our neighbor needs from us. God, for Christ's sake, does not need our good works; it is our neighbor who does need our good works.

Now we ought to know that we are named after Christ—and not because he is absent but precisely because he dwells in our midst! Our trust in him means that we are Christs to one another and act toward our neighbors as Christ has acted toward us.¹⁷

This is the true and proper use of good works, in relationship

intro. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 50.

15. Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, 355 (The Creed, Second Article, 4)

16. Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 62.

17. Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 84.

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to the needs of the neighbor and not in relationship to pleasing God, who has already been sufficiently pleased by all Christ has accomplished on our behalf.¹⁸ "This teaching tells us that the good we have from God should flow from one to the other and be common to all. Everyone should 'put on' the neighbor and act toward him or her as if we were in the neighbor's place. The good that flowed from Christ flows into us."¹⁹

Luther does not leave this teaching about neighbor love abstract, however. If it is the case that all Christians share a single status (*Stand*) in this world by virtue of our singular baptism into Christ²⁰, there are distinct arenas in which Christians live out their love of neighbor in the world.²¹

The first [arena] is that of the home, from which the people come. The second is that of the state, that is, the country, the people, princes, and lords, which we call the temporal [arena]. These two [arenas] embrace everything: children, property, money, animals, and so on. The home must produce, whereas the city must guard, protect, and defend. Then follows the third, God's own home and city, that is, the Church, which must obtain people from the home and protection and defense from the state. These are the three hierarchies ordained by God...the three high divine [arenas], the three divine, natural and temporal laws of God.²²

It is important to add that not only Christians serve others through such distinct arenas of service, but all human beings, whether they recognize or acknowledge it, serve God insofar as they render service to the neighbors they encounter in their daily lives.²³

18. Craig L. Nessan, "Law, Righteousness, Reason, Will, and Works: Civil and Theological Uses," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 41 (February 2014): 55–56.

19. Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 88.

20. Timothy J. Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops: Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 5.

21. Cf. Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops*, 7–14. *Amt* here will be translated as arena, not office.

22. Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), trans. Charles M. Jacobs and Eric W. Gritsch, LW 41:177. The word, "government(s)," here is rendered as "arena(s)."

23. Cf. Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C.

In his teaching about the arenas (offices/estates) Luther identifies three primary spheres in which Christians live out their baptismal vocation: 1) marriage/family, 2) government/state, and 3) church.²⁴ In the sixteenth century the first arena, marriage/family, encompassed the responsibilities of both the household and economic life. Given the divergence of economic activity beyond the home in subsequent history, it is appropriate now to distinguish four arenas for living out one's vocation: family, work, government, and church (or the religious institution of other faiths).

Service to the neighbor takes place in these specific arenas of daily life where the baptized are located.

With persons as his "hands" or "coworkers," God gives his gifts through the earthly vocations (food through farmers, fishermen and hunters; external peace through princes, judges, and orderly powers; knowledge and education through teachers and parents, etc.).²⁵

We serve the neighbors God gives us in our own family, workplace/school, in public life, and through religious institutions (the church). These represent the primary arenas where the baptized are called to love and serve other people as neighbors. "Humans are called to exercise stewardship within these organizing structures, working to preserve the created world. Given the hierarchical nature of society in Luther's time, his insistence that one's callings are located within the same social structures as everyone else was particularly important. All people have genuine callings from God, and those callings are located within, rather than outside of, ordinary human experience."²⁶ Moreover, it is urgent for us to add that each of these spheres of influence are located within the context of creation, whose elements, flora and fauna, we are also to love as neighbors from God.

The baptized live out their callings by serving neighbors in their arenas of daily life.

Each shoemaker, smith, farmer and the like has his own office and trade, and nevertheless all are equally consecrated priests and bishops. And each with his office or work ought to provide aid and service to the others, so that all kinds of work can be set up in a community to

Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 140, on the "masks" of God. This point deserves far greater elaboration, insofar as it locates vocation within God's good creation with significance for all people. Cf. Kathryn A. Kleinhans, "Places of Responsibility: Educating for Multiple Callings in Multiple Communities," in David S. Cunningham, ed., *At This Time and in This Place: Vocation and Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University, 2015).

24. Risto Saarinen, "Ethics in Luther's Theology: The Three Orders," 1–3. http://secure.wideopen.net/lts_g_s/lts_g-images/revartpdf/Saarinen1.pdf, Accessed June 23, 2016. Saarinen comments: "Luther in fact employs a variety of expressions: order (*Ordnung, ordo, ordinatio*), hierarchy (*hierarchia*), establishment (*Stift*), right (*Recht*), estate (*Stand*), order of life or "life-form" (*genus vitae*). I will use the term "arena" to name this feature of Luther's theology.

25. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 27.

26. Kleinhans, "Places of Responsibility: Educating for Multiple Callings in Multiple Communities," 107.

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support body and soul, just as the members of the body all serve each other.²⁷

For example, in the family the baptized serve as ministers to their neighbors as a son/daughter, sister/brother, aunt/uncle, spouse, or parent. In the workplace or in school, the baptized serve neighbors through diligence for the sake of neighbors in their particular responsibilities and relationships in this arena. In the public life, the baptized care for the common good, for example, through volunteer work, caring for creation, or participating in the political process. Globally, the baptized serve neighbors, for example, through mutual relationships of accompaniment, generosity in sharing, and social advocacy.

A new Babylonian captivity: The churchification of Christian ministry

The church in our time, at least in North America and Europe, faces a Babylonian captivity as all-encompassing and debilitating as that criticized by Luther in the sixteenth century. At that time the Babylonian captivity involved the church's usurpation of power over every facet of human life, asserting authority to control each and every arena.

Today the Babylonian captivity of the church, although differently guised, is equally deadly for the vitality of the church's mission: the reduction of Christian ministry to that which is done in the name of the institutional church. Church members largely think that only what is organized by the institutional church or done within the confines of a church building really counts as Christian ministry. In the last 500 years another mighty wall has been constructed aimed at securing the self-interest of the church as institution: the compartmentalization of Christian existence by confining it to those activities organized and conducted by the institutional church. This represents the "churchification" of Christian ministry.

While leaders of the institutional church may pay lip service to the universal priesthood of all believers, primary attention in many efforts at outreach involves securing financial resources and new members for the sake of the survival of the church as institution. The gap between what happens in and for the institutional church, especially on Sundays, and the involvement of people the rest of the week has become enormous. Whereas in North America

27. Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German People*, LW 44:130 (trans. Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops*, 13).

and Europe a deep rift exists between what happens in the name of the institutional church and the rest of people's lives, in other parts of the world, especially in the Southern Hemisphere and Asia, ministry as an entire way of life remains more integral and unified.²⁸ The churches of the North have much to learn from the churches of the South and East about validating and equipping all the baptized for their vocations in daily life. In those contexts however, there is also a tendency to reduce Christian ministry to the work of the institutional church.

The primary vocation of Christians is to live out the covenant God in Christ made with them at baptism: "to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth."²⁹

For thus it is written in 1 Peter 2, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a priestly royalty." Therefore we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians. But the priests as we call them, are ministers chosen from among us. All that they do is done in our name; the priesthood is nothing but a ministry. This is what we learn from 1 Corinthians 4: "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God."³⁰

At the time of the Reformation, the universal priesthood was a radical claim about the equal status of all believers before God based on baptism. It was designed to overcome the dependency of the laity on the ministrations of a clerical hierarchy.

One problem with contemporary references to "the priesthood of all believers" is that this very term now infers that in order to have real status as a minister one should become a "priest," that is, an ordained pastor. Such a notion becomes another facet of the churchification of Christian ministry. In this way, speaking today about the "priesthood" of all believers has itself become problematic. The metaphor of "priesthood" can perpetuate a clerical misunderstanding of Christian vocation in the world, that is, real ministry is what "priests" (clergy) do.

Although Luther sought to reconfigure the late medieval priesthood in relation to the priesthood of all believers, the practice of the Reformation churches has never adequately delivered on the potency of this proposal. How might we reimagine the meaning of the universal "priesthood" by interpreting it as the "neighborliness" (*diakonia*) of all believers?³¹ The neighborliness of all believers builds on the original intention of the priesthood of all believers

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concept, but emphasizes the equal status of all believers, specifically focused on the service of neighbors. All believers in Christ are equally called to serve the neighbors God gives them in their respective spheres of influence.³²

Affirming baptism as the primary ordination lends significance and status to all the baptized as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This should not be construed as a threat to the value of the pastoral ministry of Word and Sacrament. Rather, it provides the theological framework according to which pastors can serve in life-giving partnership with all members of the body of Christ. Ordained ministers serve Word and Sacrament through preaching, teaching, worship leadership, and pastoral care, in order that the baptized are set free by the gospel of Jesus Christ *from* all that holds them captive and are free *for* serving all the neighbors God gives them in the arenas of daily life. Moreover, it reminds pastors of the several roles and responsibilities they are called to serve in each arena of daily life beyond their pastoral service.

The ministry of deacons can serve as a catalyst to the revitalization of the neighborliness of all believers. Deacons exercise Word and Service ministry on behalf of the church. This ministry involves the proclamation and teaching of the word of God and service to the neighbor in particular areas of specialization. Deacons perform a twofold service in the life of the church: 1) to offer their own gifts in service to neighbors in their particular areas of specialization and 2) to serve as a catalyst in the life of the church, in order that all the baptized are equipped and empowered for ministries of word and service in every arena of daily life.

Worship practices as life practices: Becoming the body of Christ

Christians have a difficult time making connections between the

28. Cf. Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University, 2006).

29. "Affirmation of Baptism," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 237.

30. Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), trans. A.T.W. Steinhäuser, LW 36:112–113.

31. Craig L. Nessan, "The Neighborliness (*Diakonia*) of All Believers: Toward Reimagining the Universal Priesthood," in Kathryn A. Kleinhans, ed. *Together by Grace: Introducing the Lutherans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), 143–146.

32. For a theological elaboration on the meaning, convictions, and disciplines of neighborliness, see Peter Block, Walter Brueggemann, and John McKnight, *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), especially Chapters 2 and 6.

things we do at worship and the things we are called to do when we leave the church building after worship.³³ The gulf between sanctuary and street is another sign of the disease of churchification. In reality, however, everything we do at worship is directly related to forming us for a way of life as Christian people in the world. As we participate in liturgy we not only are worshipping God but also engaging in patterns that immerse us in the person and way of Jesus Christ himself, who makes us members of the body of Christ and engraves upon us Christ's very own character.

In order to grasp how worship practices are truly life practices, we need to begin with a very basic conviction: *God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is the Primary Actor when we gather for worship.* When we define liturgy as "the work of the people" it is easy for us to lose sight of the most important Lutheran conviction informing our theology of worship. "We" are not the primary actors when we gather for worship; instead God in Christ is the Primary Actor at worship who is "doing something to us." Worship is less about what we are doing for God and far more about how God is forming our character as the body of Christ in the world.

As we immerse ourselves in each worship practice of the liturgy, the Spirit forms us for specific Christian life practices in the world. Through these worship practices God etches upon us the character of Jesus Christ, which we are then sent to live out in our relationships with others in our daily lives. Repetition of the distinctive parts of the liturgy imprints upon us both a way of being and a way of serving the neighbors God gives us in the arenas of our daily lives: family/home, work/school, and for the public world.

To see what God is up to at worship, it is useful to think carefully about each element of the worship service and make explicit how each of these worship practices is formation for life practices. Confession and absolution of sins, for example, is not merely a transaction between the worshipper and God. Rather, we learn through the worship practice of confession and absolution to live our lives according to the pattern of admitting our own faults and seeking reconciliation with our neighbors. We sing hymns of praise, not only to honor God but in order that our entire lives be acts of praise. We receive God's peace by praying the *Kyrie* and by passing the peace, in order that our lives conform to Christ's way of peace in all our relationships.

We hear God's word and its proclamation as law and Gospel that we become people dwelling in God's word as the most important instruction (*Torah*) for our lives. We confess creeds as declarations of the core convictions for which we live and for which we would be willing to die. We pray intercessions, not only to ask God to intervene in the lives and concerns for which we pray; rather, these intercessions become our own mission statement. The things for which we pray are the very things to which we are to devote our own energy and effort. We receive an offering, which is to be understood as a sign that we intend to offer our bodies as a living

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sacrifice to God, which is our spiritual worship (Rom 12:1–2).

We share the Lord's Supper, saying that this is a meal in the name of Christ Jesus where all are welcome and where there is enough for all. Here we are formed as people who extend radical hospitality and share generously what we have with others in need.

Thus by means of this sacrament, all self-seeking love is rooted out and gives place to that which seeks the common good of all; and through the change wrought by love there is one bread, one drink, one body, one community. This is the true unity of Christian[s].³⁴

At the conclusion of worship we receive a blessing and are sent. As you have been formed by these practices of worship, now live your lives according to these very patterns! At worship we are formed as the body of Christ with the character of Jesus Christ engraved upon us by these practices of worship.³⁵ The practices we repeat at worship are the habits—a way of life—that shape our very identity as members of the body of Christ. Go in peace as the body of Christ: serve the Lord, share the good news, remember the poor!

The Nicene Creed names four characteristics by which the church is known: one, holy, catholic, apostolic. Normally as we reference these "marks" we think exclusively about the internal constitution of the church. These marks have been understood as ways the church is called to be true to its own identity, for example, ecumenical engagement as a sign of unity, church discipline as a sign of holiness, relating to other churches across time and space as a sign of catholicity, and faithfulness to biblical tradition as a sign of apostolicity.

Our neighbors, however, need these marks of the church not only to be lived out internally within the church but also externally—for the sake of the world. What would it mean to turn these ancient marks of the church inside out? Suddenly, the character of the body of Christ takes on new vitality for loving neighbors.

Oneness as a distinguishing character mark of the church comes to expression as the body of Christ gives itself to serve as a force for reconciliation and peacemaking in a world where estrangement and violence threaten to destroy the fabric of human

33. For a primer on the significance of liturgical worship, Gordon W. Lathrop, *Central Things: Worship in Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

34. Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* (1519), LW 35:67.

35. For the following, see Craig L. Nessan, *Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as Ministering Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

community. Being body of Christ means praying, learning, and embodying “the things that make for peace” (Luke 19:42).

Holiness as a character mark of the church means engagement by the body of Christ in the work of social justice. Social holiness, following in the way of Jesus, entails feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, casting out evil spirits, radical hospitality to strangers, giving shelter to the homeless, and visiting prisoners (Matt 25:31–40).

Catholicity, as a character mark urgently needed in our times, involves the apprehension that human beings are made of the selfsame material stuff (elements) as all the rest of God’s creation. Human destiny is entirely dependent on the wellness of creation. Earth, water, and sky, all flora and fauna are also neighbors God has given us to love in the spirit of the Great Commandment (Matt 22:34–40).

Apostolicity as a character mark summons the body of Christ to vigilance in respecting and defending the inherent dignity of every person who is created in God’s image and for whom Jesus Christ died, without any exceptions. The apostolic imperative means we view every human being as someone precious to God, whose human rights are worth defending for Jesus’ sake (Matt 11:28–30).

These four marks, which distinguish the character of Jesus Christ existing as community, constitute what it means for the body of Christ to live out our baptismal vocation for the sake of the neighbors God gives us in the arenas of our daily lives. At worship we put on “the mind of Christ” (Phil 2:1–5) and are formed as disciples in the way of Jesus. Being the body of Christ today means engaging in life-giving relationships with others and with creation as shalom church, embodying these character marks of the collective person Jesus Christ for the life of the world.

Here we draw an explicit connection between baptismal vocation and a theology and ethics of the cross.³⁶ Jesus calls us to costly discipleship in the arenas of daily life: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). Loving neighbors and loving creation mean entering the suffering of this world and taking the suffering of neighbors upon ourselves toward God’s mending of creation (*tikkun olam*). Costly grace!

The Reformation’s unfulfilled promise: Toward a Life of Faith Movement

For Luther “faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace so certain that you could stake your life on it one thousand times.”³⁷ Charles Taylor comments on the Reformation heritage:

...the fullness of Christian life was to be found within

36. Two classic treatments are Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ As the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) and Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigent Theology of the Cross* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976).

37. Martin Luther, “Prefaces to the New Testament,” LW 35:370–371.

Being the body of Christ today means engaging in life-giving relationships with others and with creation as shalom church, embodying these character marks of the collective person Jesus Christ for the life of the world.

the activities of this life, in one’s calling and in marriage and the family. The entire modern development of the affirmation of ordinary life was, I believe, foreshadowed and initiated, in all its facets, in the spirituality of the Reformers.³⁸

Ironically, however, Luther’s affirmation of the universal priesthood largely has remained an unfulfilled promise of the Reformation, insofar as the churches themselves have perpetuated their own forms of ecclesial incurvatus in se and defended a clerical hierarchy instead of focusing their efforts on equipping the baptized for ministry in all arenas of daily life (Eph 4:11–16).

Bonhoeffer’s call to costly discipleship finds its response when the costly grace of God in Jesus Christ sets us free to live out baptismal vocation for the sake of neighbors in our spheres of influence in daily life. Christian discipleship follows Jesus into the places he promises to meet us: yes, at worship in Word and Sacrament, yet also fully present in the relationships, roles, and responsibilities we have with the neighbors we encounter in everyday life (cf. Matt 25:34–40). How can we recover—again for the first time—the vocation of all the baptized serving their neighbors in families, at work and school, and for the common good, not only through what is organized by churches?

Justification by grace through faith in Christ alone must be inextricably paired with baptismal vocation as its matching twin. This involves no diminishment of the pure mercy of the Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ in Luther’s concept has always had freeing power—both freedom *from* and freedom *for*. “Freedom for” emerges because we have been justified by grace alone, based on the sheer gift to us of our belovedness for Christ’s sake. The event of God’s unconditional favor inherently turns us away from self-preoccupation, frees us, and turns us to care for the needs of neighbors and the integrity of creation. Justification and baptismal vocation belong together, just as the Great Commandment holds together love for God and love of neighbor (Matt 22:37–39).

On the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation a movement has emerged within the Evangelical Lutheran Church

38. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 218.

in America called the Life of Faith Initiative.³⁹ This reform movement aims to reinvigorate focus on the ministry of all the baptized in many and varied forms of service to neighbors through family, workplace, school, local community, and world. The purpose of the Life of Faith Initiative is to provoke a cultural change that frees us to make *service by the baptized in the arenas of daily life the central focus of the church's mission*.

The Life of Faith Initiative is a grassroots movement encouraging all synods, congregations, and church members, from children to adults, to claim their ministries in daily life. The Initiative embraces a common vision expressed in the theme: "Trusting Jesus. Serving Our Neighbors." Each community is encouraged to decide how the Life of Faith Initiative will become a vital part of its own ministry.

The vision of the Life of Faith Initiative affirms:

- We will learn to speak of "the expressions of the church" first as the people themselves, as well as the congregations, synods, denomination, and other agencies and institutions.
- We will be able to speak as easily and concretely about the ministry by all the baptized in daily life as we currently do about the ministry that happens in and through congregations and institutions.
- The center of gravity for our living out "missional church" will shift from what we do as the church gathered to what we do as the church scattered.
- The understanding of "ministry" will grow from "what pastors do" and "what we do as congregations" to include the love and service that is lived out in our everyday roles and relationships.
- We will become practiced at interpreting ministry in terms of the impact we are making in our homes, workplaces, schools, local communities, and around the world—not exclusively in terms of money received by the church or numbers of participants at church activities.
- All of us—from children to adults—will be able comfortably and confidently to speak and live the faith in our daily lives.
- Burdens will be lifted from pastors when they are no longer seen as the ones primarily responsible for the ministry of the congregation; they will find joy and fulfillment as ministry multiplies through the lives of all God's people.
- "Church" will no longer be in competition with the activities and responsibilities of members, and "ministry" will be expanded without asking people to add something more to their busy lives.
- The gathering rite in worship will be revised to better receive people after a week of ministry, allowing them to report "God sightings" and to receive forgiveness for failures; the sending rite will be expanded to better commission, equip, and send

people for the coming week of ministry.

- When faith is connected to life, congregations will experience renewal in purpose and vitality.

Just as Vatican II initiated an era of liturgical renewal during which sacramental ministry has been regaining its central place, today we need *a renewal of the ministry of the word*, in order that congregations become teaching and learning communities where the people of God are equipped for the work of ministry in all their spheres of influence. As we reflect on the priorities for living out our ministries in daily life, we offer the following proposals.

God gives us neighbors to serve in the primary community of family. Two primary responsibilities for serving neighbors in families include: a) providing basic *nutrition* and b) providing healthy *nurture* and solid education, forming the next generation to attain capacity to care for others.

God gives us neighbors to serve in our daily work, no matter where that labor is lived out. Two primary responsibilities for serving neighbors in daily work include: a) securing *sufficiency* for human livelihood and b) providing *significance* and meaning to life through the creative use of human gifts in the workplace.

God gives us neighbors to serve through religious institutions insofar as these institutions contribute to the common good. Two primary responsibilities for serving neighbors through religious institutions include: a) instilling a posture of *gratitude* in relation to life itself and b) promoting *generosity* in relation to the needs of others.

God gives us neighbors to serve through engagement for the common good. Two primary responsibilities for serving neighbors in public life include: a) participation in the democratic process to implement strong and equitable *laws* which promote the good of all and b) community organization and advocacy in political process, not merely to guarantee one's own self-interest, but to protect the needs of the most vulnerable, those whom Jesus named the *least*.⁴⁰

If the universal priesthood is an unfulfilled promise of the Reformation, how can both theology and church practice address this deficit by refocusing our attention on equipping church members for Christian vocation, claiming baptism as ordination to ministry, as we serve the neighbors God gives us in each arena of daily life?

39. Life of Faith Initiative: Trusting Jesus. Serving Our Neighbors. <http://lifeoffaith.info/> Accessed June 26, 2016.

40. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge: Harvard Belknap, 1971) employs the term "leximin" (the law of attending to the marginalized) as fundamental principle of a just society.