



## Commentary on the Common Confession

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### **CC5) The Priesthood of All Believers**

We believe and confess that the Holy Spirit makes all who believe in Jesus Christ to be priests for service to others in Jesus' name, and that God desires to make use of the spiritual gifts he has given through the priesthood of all believers.

Martin Luther appealed to the idea of the priesthood of the baptized to call on the laity to take leadership in the reform of church and society. That reform included both emphasizing that the proper role of ordained pastors is to preach the word publicly and administer the sacraments and recognizing the spiritual value of lay vocations in the world.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is crippled in its mission by a perverse confusion regarding the roles of both ordained and non-ordained ministers.

Clergy are afflicted by what Joseph Sittler once referred to as "the maceration of the minister," as they are pulled apart by demands from every direction. When lay people use their gifts to carry out the various ministries of the congregation, pastors are freed to devote their time and effort to equipping the saints for the work of ministry by preaching, teaching, leading the congregation in prayer and worship, and caring for souls. (Eph. 4:12)

Laity, on the other hand, often are uncomfortable exercising their priesthood either in the congregation or the community by fear of "doing something wrong" or encroaching in areas supposedly reserved to the ordained. Often pastors are too busy "running" the church to train and equip the saints for mission, or they are threatened by the realization that for many tasks some laity may be more competent than the clergy.

An egregious example of this is the so-called "public church" emphasis of the ELCA, in which a legitimate ministry of the saints in the world is co-opted by church officials, under the mistaken notion that their ecclesiastical office somehow qualifies them to speak for the church as they advocate particular solutions for complex issues in the political realm.

A critical mistake is to see leadership in the church as an exercise of power instead of an opportunity to serve (Mark 10:43-44). All God's baptized saints, ordained or not, are called to serve one another in love as Christ has loved us. Any discussions of ministry in the church are derailed when the essential nature of Christian ministry as servanthood is subverted by struggles for power and control.

Congregations that agree to the Common Confession commit themselves to seeking to discern the proper spheres of both the ordained and non-ordained in the one spiritual office that exists — that of the baptized saints of God. This does not mean that their tasks are interchangeable. Congregations and individuals who agree to the Common Confession will differ regarding what this "priesthood of all believers" means for liturgical roles. However, they are of one mind that offices in the church, as the Apostle writes in Ephesians, exist to equip the saints so that the Body of Christ can be built up in love as the People of God go into the world to serve their neighbors.

A church that takes seriously the common priesthood of the baptized will be a community devoted to servanthood within and outside the congregation. Leaders and officers in such a church will see it as their function to equip the saints to be witnesses for Christ in word and deed, and the laity will use their varied gifts to administer the life of the congregation and to serve God by serving their neighbors.

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