

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
2020 Symposium

**Reaction to Pastor Jason Oakland's Essay
"Luther's Call to Action: A Consideration of
To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation"**

Thank you, Pastor Oakland, for serving as the introductory essayist for the seminary's symposium on Luther's important 1520 treatises. Not only did you provide the historical background as assigned, but your treatment of *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* demonstrated that, while it is not the first of Luther's 1520 treatises chronologically, it served as his "call to action."

Your treatment of the historical context of the years 1517 to 1520 shows how important these years were to Luther's development. As you mentioned, it can be easy to move from the Castle Church door straight to the drama of the Diet of Worms and skip over the efforts that were made to silence Luther, as well as the opportunities he was afforded at both the Heidelberg Disputation and the Leipzig Debate to think through the far-reaching implications of what he was learning from his study of Scripture as he prepared lectures and sermons. However, the progress of the Lutheran Reformation during the 1520s and 1530s does not really make sense without understanding what was pushing Luther toward a break with Rome in the years immediately following the posting of *The Ninety-Five Theses*. You helped us see how Luther had moved from addressing various issues in the church to articulating a more comprehensive and concrete plan for reforming the church. As you noted, he was moving from critic to reformer (28-29).

This consideration of historical context provides a couple of lessons for us. First, it is always important to understand the context when reading Luther because so much of what he wrote has been published. One can find something in Luther to back up almost any assertion. We always need to ask a few questions: Where was Luther in his theological journey when he wrote

this? What specific situation or person was he addressing? What political issues were in the background? Was Luther's health deteriorating or was he feeling like the end of his life might be near? What kind of writing are you reading (sermon, letter, lecture, treatise, table talk)? Did Luther intend it for publication? The answers to these questions (and perhaps others) are important as we digest Luther's writings.

A second lesson is more general. Your treatment of the historical background is another demonstration of the importance of the study of church history for the ongoing life and work of the church. You pointed out what pushed Luther's desire and drive for the reform of the church: his pastoral concern. People were being deceived. They were being directed away from Christ. You stated so clearly, "It would be wise for those who seek to follow in Luther's footsteps to remember that his goal, and the work that stemmed from it, was the care of souls" (29). As we are faced with the challenges of increasingly blatant immorality, anti-Christian attitudes, demographics which would seem to forecast an ever greater numerical decline in WELS over the next few decades, as well as the current issues brought on by the COVID pandemic, we would do well to consider the past history of the church for encouragement and a reality check that we are not living in the darkest times known to humanity. Twenty-first century America does not sound all that different from the first three centuries of the New Testament church in the Roman Empire. The church has ministered to people through various plagues across the centuries. The pastors of the Lutheran church were often islands of stability in a sea of chaos during the devastating Thirty Years' War. I wonder what kind of predictions would have been made in 1933 about the future of the Wisconsin Synod as it faced a debilitating debt, a depression economy, fallout from intrasynodical controversy, and seminary graduates sitting idly without calls, all of which led the synod in convention to take the unprecedented step of voting out the sitting synod

president. Would the data and statistics have predicted that fifty years later the Wisconsin Synod would have congregations in all fifty states and a growing world mission program? A review of history can remind us that Jesus lives and reigns over all things for the good of his church and that his gospel often flourishes in the face of the greatest challenges.

Two of the applications you made, Pastor Oakland, deserve to be highlighted. First, you pointed out that perhaps the key issue Luther was addressing in *To the Christian Nobility* was the question of authority in the church. This is really at the heart of the papacy's "three walls" Luther tears down. In this treatise, we see Luther unequivocally stating the *Sola Scriptura* principle.

Your words regarding how this *Sola Scriptura* principle plays out when discussions are among those who both hold to this principle are worth hearing again.

For the past five hundred years, followers of Luther have vigorously studied Scripture because they are convinced of its clarity and its authority in matters of faith and life. That study must continue. That trust in the perspicuity of Scripture must also continue, and so must the reliance on the Word of God as the authority for what is believed and taught. When two sincere brothers disagree, that situation calls for love and patience and prayer. It should also be a renewed call to study even more closely the point in question. (31-32)

This speaks to why our ministerial education system is geared toward the study of the Scriptures in the Greek and Hebrew, why exegetical papers presented at pastoral conferences are so important, and why circuit meetings and study groups where brothers dig into the Word together are so vital. Brothers, make attendance at these gatherings and your personal study in the Word a high priority in your schedules and your future ministry.

The second application to highlight is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. While *To the Christian Nobility* may not have been the first place Luther discussed the royal priesthood, it was certainly the most comprehensive and far-reaching. The priesthood of all believers was his theological rationale for appealing to the princes and town councils in his call to action. He would not have seen this as a confusion of the two kingdoms. Rather, because of

the institutional church's refusal—and even outright opposition—to make changes based on the Word of God, he turned to the only other people in his context who could facilitate and support reform: Christian rulers. The situation in the Holy Roman Empire allowed for this appeal to be a potential reality and not a call to rebellion.

The priesthood of all believers was a key theological emphasis driving Luther's educational reforms, his translation of the Bible in the vernacular, his worship reforms (especially his reintroduction of congregational hymn singing), and the writings of his catechisms. These proved to be the most influential concrete reforms stemming from his call to action. We continue to be blessed as heirs and recipients of these reforms today.

The priesthood of all believers is worth continual exploration and application in our American context.¹ It is not about my “individual rights and privileges” (33) or doing whatever I want. Instead, it is about how I can serve others with the Word and sacrifice myself for others in whatever vocation I am in. When it comes to carrying out the church's mission as a gathering of believers, the royal priesthood and the public ministry work in partnership to proclaim the gospel, reach out to the community, edify God's people, and serve others. Your quote from Professor Deuchlander's *Grace Abounds* sums it up well.

It is a beautiful and wondrous thing: God gives the gospel means of grace; through the gospel means of grace he creates the church, this royal priesthood; through his church, his royal priests, he calls workers to the holy office of the ministry; through their service with the means of grace he continues to build his church, to call and build up other royal priests. It is one grand circle by which God is glorified in the world, souls are rescued from the jaws of the devil, and the church marches on from the church militant on earth to the church triumphant in heaven. (35)

¹As our essayist noted, this was done at the 2017 Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium by Martin Luther College President Mark Zarling in his essay, “Luther and the Saints: The Priesthood of All Believers – A True Treasure of the Lutheran Reformation.”

All of this makes your concluding encouragement so appropriate, Pastor Oakland. As confessional Lutherans, we ought to read more Luther—his sermons, key treatises, Large Catechism, letters, and commentaries. Brothers, after the Scriptures, put the Lutheran Confessions and Luther’s writings at the top of your reading list, instead of grabbing the latest Evangelical-Reformed bestseller. Pastor Oakland’s concluding remarks should be all the motivation we need. “Make some time to read Luther, and be led by him to a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the Word. And in doing so, be formed into the kind of theologian Luther was: a theologian who loves to hear the Lord speak in his Word and who loves to serve souls with that Word” (37).

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