

# Ministry in the Minds and Lives of the Confessors

*Arnold J. Koelpin*

[This essay was presented to the WELS Ministry Symposium at Northwestern College, Watertown, Wisconsin, December 29-30, 1992. The author is professor of religion and social studies at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota.]

## **Introduction: The question of ministry**

In this season of Christ's birth we are privileged to discuss a subject that lies at the heart of the Lutheran Reformation and of our life in Christ. Dr. Martin Luther's rediscovery of the gospel of justification by faith reinvigorated the church with the energy of the Spirit by the preaching of God's Word. But significantly for our work, this rediscovery also led Luther to question all traditional ecclesiastical forms that bound the gospel into legal knots.

At the time both the church and its ministry suffered from legal bondage to canon law and a hierarchical structure that practically restored the Old Testament priesthood. The Lutheran response was as simple as it was profound: In the New Testament church, every Christian is a priest (1 Pe 2:9). "All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office," Luther explained on the basis of 1 Corinthians 12:12f. What makes every Christian a priest is that "we have one baptism, one gospel, one faith."<sup>1</sup>

The trumpet blast that crumbled the walls behind which the papal hierarchy had entrenched itself simultaneously summoned Christians to a new evangelical understanding of church and ministry. The confessors avoided the temptation to canonize or re-pristiniate the forms of the ancient church. The marvelous freedom with which they handled the reform demonstrated a sensitivity to keeping past and present forms that served the gospel. But as slaves of the righteousness that comes by faith (Ro 6:18), they felt bound alone to those distinct gospel mandates which the church's Lord left behind at his ascension. "In, with, under" and "through" these mandates Christ remained really present in the church and keeps on ruling the church with his abiding presence.<sup>2</sup>

Today none of us is able to approach the topic of ministry innocently and without expectation of answers to present-day questions. How does the universal priesthood of all believers square with the specific office of the ministry? What is the relationship between clergy and laity, between pastor and people, between the congregation which calls and the officeholder? Whom do ministers serve, Christ or the congregation? If everybody is a minister, what does ordination mean? If everyone is not, who is to be ordained? Are all church-workers ministers? Is "staff-ministry" or "team ministry" a contradiction in itself?<sup>3</sup> In light of modern principles of Church Growth, are we wrestling with questions from other confessions without recognizing that they are falsely put?<sup>4</sup>

In gathering for this symposium, we are seeking guidance from the Holy Scriptures and the Confessions drawn from them to recapture God's truths and address them to the life of the church in our day. Consistent with

<sup>1</sup>"To the Christian Nobility," 1520, *Luther's Works* [LW] 44, 127.

<sup>2</sup>Augsburg Confession, III and V (*Trig. 45*; Tappert, 29-31).

<sup>3</sup>See Marquart, *The Church*, p 122.

<sup>4</sup>Sasse, *We Confess the Church*, 72f; Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, 246ff; Maurer, *Gemeindezucht, Gemeindeamt*, 24ff.

the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod's time-honored approach to studies on the Holy Scriptures and the church's confession, this symposium begins with an historical study and does so for good reason. The Lutheran understanding of church and ministry is deeply embedded in its theology as a whole. We do well to listen to Luther's own warning: "We exhibit the art of keen and loquacious disputing on divine truths—which we have learned from Aristotle—so that we talk about [them] as a shoemaker about his leather."<sup>5</sup>

God's Word is never an object for us to mold, but both church and confession are molded by it. All who detract from this central focus on God's Word need to hear the Reformer's reminder: "The entire life and substance of the church is in the Word of God . . . for it is through the gospel alone that the church is conceived, formed, nourished, born, trained, fed, clothed, cared for, strengthened, armed, and preserved."<sup>6</sup>

## I. Ministry in the minds of the confessors

### A. *The gospel shapes the ministry*

To appreciate the evangelical insights of our confessional forebears, we need to sketch in broad outline three contrasting views of ministry that emerged from Reformation times. The hierarchical position of Rome is known. Our purpose is not to trace the growth of the papacy nor to explore the Petrine theory of teaching authority in the church and its implications for priestly activities in the sacrificial mass.<sup>7</sup> For our discussion it is enough to recognize that the Roman ministry rests on the sacrament of ordination, which is said to impart the peculiar gift of an indelible mark so that "once a priest, always a priest." The Council of Florence (1439) listed ordination, together with baptism and confirmation, as the three sacraments "which indelibly impress upon the soul a character, that is, a certain spiritual mark which distinguishes them from the rest." This means that a Roman priest never reverts to the status of a layperson even if he no longer exercises the office of the ministry.<sup>8</sup>

In dispensing with this hierarchical view as falsely grounded, the Lutheran confessors at the same time maintained that such abuse should not obscure a rightful understanding of ordination in the life of the church. In an evangelical turnabout of terminology, they were willing to grant that "if ordination is interpreted in relation to the ministry of the Word, we have no objection to calling ordination a sacrament."<sup>9</sup> Why? The terminological concession could be made only because the ministry of the gospel is mandated, only because ordination in such a case would be equated with the church's mandate to preach and teach God's Word. "The ministry of the Word has God's command and promises," they affirmed on the basis of Romans 1:16 and Isaiah 55:11.

Stress on the importance of God's gospel mandates in shaping the ministry helped the confessors avoid the pitfall of the Reformed presbyterian view of ministry. In Calvin's Geneva, ministry arose from the congregation, from which representatives were elected to the "four sorts of offices that our Lord instituted for the government of his church . . . first pastors, then teachers, after which elders, and, in the fourth place, deacons."<sup>10</sup>

The four divinely-instituted ecclesiastical offices served as part of the city governance. The Genevan Little and Grand Council supervised both doctrine and life in the city. Through a separate court (Consistory), church "elders" became "deputy members of the Council" and legitimized the exercise of church discipline by

<sup>5</sup>*Weimar Ausgabe* [WA] 3, 382, 7ff.

<sup>6</sup>WA 7, 721.

<sup>7</sup>See WA, TR 323:22ff and Smalcald Articles II, II 1ff (*Trig.* 463; Tappert, 293).

<sup>8</sup>Ref. in *LW* 36:111.

<sup>9</sup>CA Apol. XIII: 11-12 (*Trig.* 311; Tappert, 212).

<sup>10</sup>*Ordonnances Ecclesiastiques in Corpus Reformatorum* 38:5ff.

means of government authority. The Consistory was responsible for enforcement of the now famous Genevan ordinances to keep the moral order God demanded. It regulated church matters by precept—for example, "the whole household shall attend sermons on Sunday, except those left at home to tend the children and cattle." It controlled daily life as well so that "anyone singing indecent, licentious songs, or dancing *en virollet* or otherwise, shall be kept in prison three days and then sent to the council."<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, the Lutheran confessors did not attempt to restore Christianity by simply reviving the forms of the early church. They believed the dynamic for church reform lay in preaching justification by faith as the article by the which the church stands or falls. The gospel and its mandates must shape the church's ministry. The confession at Augsburg demonstrated how the gospel mandates led the confessors to steer the middle way of faith (*via media*) between Roman hierarchy and Reformed presbyterianism.

Through careful structuring, the Augustana showed how the ministry was embedded in Christian theology. After laying a solid foundation in the doctrines concerning God (1), original sin (2), and Christ (3), the confessors highlighted our justification before God by faith in Christ's atoning work (4). This broad setting gave an opportunity to air the critical question: How do we get justifying faith? They answered simply: "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry" (5).

### *B. Universal priesthood relates to the ministerial office*

The answer was bold. If Luther originally placed the universal priesthood of all believers in opposition to a special priesthood, the confessors at Augsburg now guarded against the charge of making every person a minister. They clarified their gospel-based position by distinguishing between the office of the ministry as such (CA, V) and the call into the public ministry (CA, XIV). In their eyes, God instituted the ministerial office, not by ordaining a priestly caste but by providing the means (the gospel and the sacraments) by which he calls believers to faith and the church into being. On the other hand, the call to administer the means of grace in an ecclesiastical order is directed to special persons.

The distinction between office and officeholder was not new nor unscriptural. Luther himself anticipated this distinction in a treatise "Concerning the Ministry" (1523) addressed to the Bohemian Hussites. There he laid down a basic biblical principle: "A priest is not identical with Presbyter or Minister—for one is *born* to be priest, one *becomes* a minister" (*Sacerdotum non esse quod presbyterum vel ministrum, illum nasce, hunc fieri*).<sup>12</sup>

#### 1. Born to the priesthood

What does this mean? Luther explains that a New Testament priest does not belong to the external order, but to the spiritual order. For under Christ's rule, a priest "was not made, but was born. He was created, not ordained. He was born, not indeed of flesh, but through a birth of the Spirit, by water and Spirit in the washing of regeneration [John 3:6f.; Titus 3:5f]." Under Christ then "all Christians are priests, and all priests are Christians."<sup>13</sup> Christ pulls the rug out from a restricted priesthood under the law and by his work makes every Christian a priest without restriction.

This priestly office derives from our union with Christ. Christ is a priest of the new covenant. Christians, who are one body with him and flesh of his flesh, have all things in common with him (Ro 8:32; Ga 3:28; 1 Cor 10:17; Eph 4:4; 5:30). There is nothing abstract here except the new creation brought about by our union with

<sup>11</sup>Ordonnances sur la police des eglises de la campagne: CR 38, 51ff.

<sup>12</sup>LW 40:18; WA 12: 178,9-10.

<sup>13</sup>LW 40:19.

Christ. The priesthood is true "only because of the new birth. Wherefore we are priests, as he is Priest, sons as he is Son, kings as he is King. For he makes us to sit with him in heavenly places, as companions and coheirs with him, in whom and with whom all things are given us." Such expressions "indicate our oneness with Christ—one loaf, one cup, one body."<sup>14</sup>

It is a mistake therefore to use the term "ordained" in connection with the priesthood of all believers. For any Christian "to say, 'I am ordained a priest,'" is New Testament nonsense.<sup>15</sup> Our priesthood remains a spiritual order common to all Christians and free from external control. In the church, Christ rules and gives all his priests the same duties.

The distinguishing feature of the New Testament priesthood is its sevenfold task. First and foremost is "the teaching of the Word of God, on which everything else depends," then the duty to baptize, to consecrate or to administer the sacred bread and wine, to bind and loose from sin (the office of the keys), to sacrifice and consecrate one's body as a spiritual sacrifice, to pray for others, and finally to judge and pass on doctrine.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. Becoming a minister

In view of this sevenfold task, what does Luther mean in saying: One is born to be a priest, but one becomes a minister? As soon as one makes something special out of what is common to all, a seeming conflict arises. How does the universal priesthood square with the special office of the ministry? Is it not a logical deduction that all cannot perform the priestly duties at the same time in the same place? Is the public ministry a purely human arrangement (*iure humano*) or is it God's ordinance (*iure divino*)?

To clear the way for a scriptural understanding of the ministry, Luther makes several observations:

1. Because the spiritual office is the common right and property of all Christians, no individual can assume this right for himself "by his own authority and arrogate to himself alone what belongs to all."<sup>17</sup>
2. In extraordinary circumstances, however, necessity knows no bounds. "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."<sup>18</sup> But emergency situations do not establish the rule.
3. To avoid confusion of terms, the name "priest" should simply be dropped in speaking of those who are in charge of Word and sacrament. New Testament Christians do better to use terms such as "ministers, deacons, bishops, stewards, presbyters (a name often used and indicating the older members)."<sup>19</sup>

With this pre-understanding the Reformer is ready to discuss the ministerial office. What results is a clear-cut distinction between the congregation and the pastor, between the office and the officeholder. The office comes from Christ and is divine; it is a holy ministry. But the officeholder comes to this divine office through the congregation to whom God has entrusted the office.

---

<sup>14</sup>LW 40:20.

<sup>15</sup>LW 40:20.

<sup>16</sup>LW 40:21-31.

<sup>17</sup>LW 40:34.

<sup>18</sup>LW 40:34.

<sup>19</sup>LW 40:35.

Two considerations help us to understand the relationship. First and foremost is the importance of God's mission command. In commenting on Jonah's ministry, Luther writes: "Both the office and the Word employed in the office must be comprehended in the divine command....Peter also emphasized these two facts (1 Peter 4:11): 'Whoever speaks, [speaks] as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies,' so that he may be sure that both the Word and the office are divine and commanded by God."<sup>20</sup> The truth that God instituted the office of preaching occurs often in Luther's writings as self-evident,<sup>21</sup> and the confessors explicitly affirmed the divine office in Article V of the Augsburg Confession.

But equally important for our understanding, the minister comes into his office by a divine call. Precisely because the congregation of believers recognizes the ministry as God's institution, it does not consider the call into the public ministry a mere human arrangement. Although the call to serve in the public ministry comes through the congregation, it is a divine call. "Let those who come together cast their ballots and elect one or as many as are needed of those who are capable," Luther advises. "By prayer and the laying on of hands let them commend and certify these to the whole assembly, and recognize and honor them as lawful bishops and ministers of the Word, believing beyond a shadow of a doubt that this has been done and accomplished by God."<sup>22</sup>

The call establishes a special relationship between pastor and people. The authority of the congregation and rule of the pastor are not at odds with one another because both are under the authority of Christ and his Word. The pastor serves both Christ and the congregation. He serves Christ because the crucified and risen Lord wishes to give forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation through the proclamation of his Word. "God has established a kingdom to which he has sent forth his disciples...that they might help people from their sins.... The person should have no influence at all. But one should look to the One who gave the commission."<sup>23</sup>

But in his role as Christ's representative, the pastor also serves the congregation. In the public ministry, he stands in the place of Christ.<sup>24</sup> In the name and in the stead of the Lord Jesus Christ, he forgives the sins of the congregation. So "do not stare toward heaven when you want your sins forgiven. You have it here below....Go to the minister. In an emergency tell your neighbor to declare absolution in the name of Jesus Christ. Then you have the Word. When they do so, Christ has done so."<sup>25</sup> In this way the gospel shapes both the ministry and the church. For "faith comes by hearing the message and the message is heard through the Word of Christ" (Ro 10:17).

In its relationship with the pastor, however, the congregation also has a special role and responsibility over against the pastor and the office he holds. As the pastor serves the congregation, the congregation in turn serves the pastor. Under God "the congregation has the right and power to judge all teaching and to call, appoint, and dismiss teachers."<sup>26</sup>

In a short treatise on the subject, Luther gives a proper understanding of a congregation's spiritual authority. He demonstrates how Christ gave all Christians equally both the right and the authority to judge teaching. The words of Christ in John 10:4ff; Matthew 7:15; 24:4-5; and of the Apostle in 1 Thessalonians 5:2, Romans 16:17f, etc., charged congregations to distinguish true prophets from the false. Once again the universal

---

<sup>20</sup>LW 19:83.

<sup>21</sup>Elert, 343.

<sup>22</sup>LW 40:37.

<sup>23</sup>WA 41:544f.

<sup>24</sup>CA Apol VII:28 (*Trig.*, 237; Tappert, 173).

<sup>25</sup>WA 41:546.

<sup>26</sup>LW 39:305ff

priesthood of all believers comes into play. The authority of the church rests on the fact that "every Christian possesses the word of God and is taught and anointed by God to be priest."<sup>27</sup>

We have come full circle. The congregation and the pastor interrelate in the office through reciprocal roles. Neither operates independently of the other. Like the roles of man and woman in the temporal order, there is unity in the diverse roles established by God (1 Cor 11: 11f). In the spiritual order, pastor and people are interdependent and are united through the office of the Word for the welfare of Christ's church. The same Word that creates the church creates the office of the ministry.

## II. Ministry in the lives of the confessors

### A. Keeping order in the church

The importance of the ministerial office as a function of God's Word puts the question of the special office of the ministry more sharply into focus. The ministry of the Word does not just hang there by itself. God instituted the divine office for the purpose of bringing people to faith and sustaining their life of faith. Precisely because the "ministry of the Word and the administration of the sacraments to *others*"<sup>28</sup> is a divine office, entrusting an individual to the high spiritual office should be done with care.

#### 1. Properly calling a candidate

"In the Word we see how ministers of the Word are to be sought," Luther observes, "namely, from the flock of Christ alone, and nowhere else." Because of its need, "the community as a whole has both the right and command to commit by common vote such an office to one or more to be exercised in its stead."<sup>29</sup>

The method of selecting the officeholder is left free. If Luther argues for letting the assembly "cast their ballots and elect one or as many as needed from those who are capable," he wants to stress two points. For one, the calling procedure itself is a human arrangement (*iure humano*) and follows sanctified common sense. In breaking from Roman tradition of sacramental ordination and appointment by the bishop, "this [congregational] procedure is forced upon us by necessity," Luther observes, "and is commended by the common understanding of faith."<sup>30</sup>

The reason for recommending the people's choice is simple: The church needs the Word. "For since the church owes its birth to the Word, is nourished, aided, and strengthened by it, it is obvious that it cannot be without the Word. Without the Word, it ceases to be a church."<sup>31</sup> But at the same time the Reformer also cautions against canonizing the procedure he recommends. "I spoke of the method of establishing a ministry of the church in my simplicity,"<sup>32</sup> he readily admits, leaving it to others more learned than he to express themselves.

The second concern, however, was of utmost importance. The calling body must elect qualified and competent ministers who are worthy and able. The qualifications are fully described by Paul in Titus 1:6ff and 1

---

<sup>27</sup>LW 39:309.

<sup>28</sup>CA Apol XIII:7 (*Trig.*, 311; Tappert, 212).

<sup>29</sup>LW 40:36.

<sup>30</sup>LW 40:37.

<sup>31</sup>LW 40:37.

<sup>32</sup>LW 40:44.

Timothy 3:2ff.<sup>33</sup> A pastor "is to be permitted in the ministry as long as he is competent and has the favor of the church as a whole, just as in civil matters any administrator is treated as an equal among his brethren."<sup>34</sup>

The Reformer had expressed concerns for training a qualified ministry already in proposals to the Christian nobility in 1520. There he called for a thoroughgoing reformation of the theological curriculum at the university level. He recognized that mere training does not make a competent pastor, because "no person is able to make a doctor of the Holy Scriptures except the Holy Spirit from heaven."<sup>35</sup>

But as in every vocation in life, training is needed. A proper education for ministers included a solid training in the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, in the ecclesiastical language of Latin, as well as in mathematics and history. Courses in logic, rhetoric, and poetics were needed to help the candidate in the linguistic and communication skills necessary for preaching and teaching the Word.<sup>36</sup> Completion of such a course of study qualifies the student to become a candidate for the holy ministry.

## 2. Order in the church

The candidate's specific call into the work of the public ministry, however, is preceded by another more general call common to all Christians. The general call is simply God's call to serve others. Luther identifies this call as the *vocatio caritatis*, the call to charity, the caring call, the ministry of love. He traces this basic call back to the Ten Commandments and the command of love, which is the essence of the law given by Moses.<sup>37</sup> "This call," Luther observes, "flows out of love. For you, I, and everyone are in debt to one another to love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>38</sup> The call to serve others belongs to the order of sanctification.<sup>39</sup>

But as important as the call to charity is for Christian life, it is not the basis for the call into the public ministry. "The *vocatio caritatis*," Luther carefully comments, "does not come from heaven or through faith." It comes in response to a need. In practical terms, the ministry of love means that "if someone needs my service and asks me, I am duty bound to act because God's Word commands me to serve my neighbor. This call needs no outward sign because my neighbor is in need and God's Word obliges me to respond. This call comes in response to my being sought, asked, and moved to act."<sup>40</sup>

In itself, therefore, the general call does not distinguish the pastor from other Christians. In fact, the call to charity can lead to confusion and disorder in the congregation when self-appointed preachers assume the functions of public ministry without a proper call. Enthusiasts operate this way. They base the call to public office on their inner call apart from God's Word and institution. Luther fingered Thomas Muentzer and Andrew Carlstadt as such fanatics who claimed, "The testimony of my inward being is enough for me."<sup>41</sup>

This is why the Lutheran confessors at Augsburg spelled out the ministerial office the way they did. They condemned those "who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the external word of the Gospel" as being without the outward sign. The sign of identification for the preaching ministry is the gospel. God himself mandated that outward sign when he established Word and

---

<sup>33</sup>LW 40:40.

<sup>34</sup>LW 40:35.

<sup>35</sup>LW 44:205.

<sup>36</sup>LW 44:200ff.

<sup>37</sup>WA 16, 35:9-12.

<sup>38</sup>WA 17 I, 362:15-16.

<sup>39</sup>LW 37:36.5.

<sup>40</sup>WA 17 I:362:14-20.

<sup>41</sup>LW 28: 329.

sacraments as the means whereby "the Holy Spirit works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel."<sup>42</sup>

Experience with the fanatic pretenders gave the Lutherans a special reason to keep the practice of ordination. Ordination was a public acknowledgement that the pastor is properly called to administer Word and sacrament. The rite did not impart the divine call. It kept the signs out front. "If ordination is interpreted in relation to the ministry of the Word," Melancthon writes, "we have no objection to calling it a sacrament....The church has the command to appoint ministers; to this we must subscribe wholeheartedly for we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it."<sup>43</sup>

But the public rite of ordination has an educative value for the congregation that cannot be overlooked. It keeps order in the church. "It is good to extol the ministry of the Word with every possible kind of praise in opposition to the fanatics who dream that the Holy Spirit does not come through the Word but because of their own preparations."<sup>44</sup>

In this way ordination guards against sneaks and unqualified preachers who upset the congregation by their lack of openness and order. In a letter against "Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers," Luther warns in his own inimitable way: Though these preachers appear "otherwise faultless and saintly through and through, still the fact that they sneak about unbidden and uncommissioned sufficiently proves that they are the devil's messengers and teachers. For the Holy Spirit did not slither in but flew publicly down from heaven. Serpents slither, but doves fly."<sup>45</sup>

By contrast, "a parish pastor can claim that he possesses the office of the ministry, baptism, the sacrament, the care of souls, and is commissioned, publicly and legally. Therefore, the people should go to him for these things."<sup>46</sup>

Luther's turnabout from rejecting Roman sacramental ordination to recommending the special liturgical act must be understood only in relationship to the call into the public ministry. "Ordination," he states, "should and can basically be nothing else (if things are done in the right way) than a call or command to carry out the office of the ministry or preaching."<sup>47</sup> In this respect it is an ecclesiastical act which publicly confirms the call. An ordination rite composed by Luther said as much:

The ordinator addresses the ordinands in these or similar words: Herein you hear that we bishops—i.e., presbyters and pastors—are called not to watch over geese or cows, but over the congregation God purchased with his own blood that we should feed them with the pure word of God and also be on guard lest wolves and sects burst in among the poor sheep.<sup>48</sup>

Thus the call and ordination are practically synonymous. But ordination, as the word itself indicates, reminds Christians that keeping order in the church is God-pleasing (1 Cor 14).

### *B. Keeping order among the orders*

<sup>42</sup>CA V (*Trig.*, 45; Tappert, 31).

<sup>43</sup>CA Apol XIII:7 (*Trig.*, 311; Tappert, 212).

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup>LW 40:384.

<sup>46</sup>LW 40:385.

<sup>47</sup>WA 38:228,238.

<sup>48</sup>LW 53:125.



The principle of order in the church has an even wider application. Luther was deeply concerned about keeping God's established order in all matters of life, in church and society, in the temporal and in the spiritual realm. "What I want to do is to keep the distinction between callings and offices," he writes with candor, "so that everyone can see to what God has called him and fulfill the duties of his office faithfully and sincerely in the service of God."<sup>49</sup>

Failure to distinguish the *vocatio caritatis* from the call to public ministry had led to disorder within the church to the devil's delight. Confusion of offices in church and society is equally disastrous. "I have written more than enough about this [distinction between offices] elsewhere, especially in the books, 'Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved' and 'Temporal Authority,'" Luther attests.<sup>50</sup> There he had sharply distinguished God's rule in the spiritual order from that in the secular order, both ordinances of God for different purposes.

The same concern for order applies within church structure. "In the church, where all should be Christians, Paul will not permit one person to assume another's office, Romans 12 [:4] and I Corinthians 12 [:14-36], but exhorts every member to do his own work so that there be no disorder, rather, that everything be done in an orderly way [1 Cor. 14:40]."<sup>51</sup>

The Reformer explains what he means by taking us back to the basic orders God established on earth for our good. In an evangelical twist of terminology, he calls these orders "hierarchies." Different from the Roman hierarchy, God did not establish hierarchies of rank, but of role. God's sacred rule does not establish some sort of pecking orders<sup>52</sup> but honors the peculiar service-role a person exercises in his life's vocation.

Luther identifies the hierarchies on earth as three. "The holy orders and true religious institutions established by God are these three: the office of priest, the estate of marriage, the civil government."<sup>53</sup> The first order has to do with God's spiritual government through the Word. The second order includes everything that has to do with householding and family life. The third order belongs to those entrusted with civil authority together with the lands and subjects over whom they rule.

Although these three religious institutions are distinct, they are nevertheless bound together by the one universal order of love. For "above these three institutions and orders is the common order of Christian love, in which one serves not only the three orders, but also serves every needy person in general with all kinds of benevolent deeds."<sup>54</sup> Any Christian who lovingly meets his obligations in service to others in these hierarchies performs a good work, holy and acceptable to God.

By setting the three universal hierarchies in contrast, we avoid confusing their functions. Yet the distinction also helps us understand how they interrelate in God's overall rule. Both householding and politics deal with temporal government and its external rule, power, and penalties. The spiritual order, on the other hand, is a ministry of the gospel. It includes "all who are engaged in the clerical office or ministry of the Word."<sup>55</sup>

## 1. The office of preaching

---

<sup>49</sup>LW 46:166.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>LW 46:166.

<sup>52</sup>*Kirchenordnungen [KO]*, I:216; see also Mt 20:25f.

<sup>53</sup>LW 37:364.

<sup>54</sup>LW 37:365.

<sup>55</sup>LW 37:365.

In "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School" Luther elaborates on the high importance of the spiritual office. God established this estate, he testifies, "not with gold or silver but with the precious blood and bitter death of his only Son...that people might everywhere have the office of preaching, baptizing, loosing, binding, giving the sacrament, comforting, warning, and exhorting with God's Word, and whatever else belongs to the pastoral office."<sup>56</sup> Different from God's temporal rule, "this office not only helps to further and sustain this temporal life and all the worldly estates, but it also gives eternal life and delivers from sin and death."<sup>57</sup>

In the spiritual order, the office of preaching is primary, foundational, and apostolic, the *sine qua non* for the church's ministry. "Inasmuch as the office of preaching the gospel is the greatest of all and certainly is apostolic, it becomes the foundation for all other functions which are built upon it, such as the offices of teachers, prophets, governing [administrating the church], speaking with tongues, the gifts of healing and helping, as Paul directs in 1 Cor. 12."<sup>58</sup>

The examples of Christ and St. Paul demonstrate the supreme importance of the preaching ministry. "Even Christ chiefly proclaimed the gospel, as the highest function of his office, and did not baptize [John 4:2]. Paul, too, gloried in the fact that he was sent not to baptize [1 Cor. 1:17], as to a secondary office, but to the primary office of preaching the gospel."<sup>59</sup>

But it would be false to conclude that the preaching office is limited to preaching. "If the office of teaching is entrusted to anyone, then everything accomplished by the Word in the church is entrusted, that is, the office of baptizing, consecrating, binding, loosing, praying, and judging doctrine."<sup>60</sup> What makes the office of preaching unique, therefore, is that it is all-inclusive. "It includes the work of pastors, teachers, preachers, lectors, priests (whom people call chaplains), sacristans, schoolmasters, and whatever other work belongs to these offices and persons."<sup>61</sup>

Roman bishops who turn God's order upside down and "leave the highest office of the Word" or "even the lower offices such as baptizing and other pastoral care" to other persons, while they "administer confirmation, consecrate churches" and other non-episcopal duties, undo their office. The church should hold the office of preaching in highest esteem, precisely because "it is the highest office, on which all others depend and from which they follow."<sup>62</sup>

## 2. Ministry for the parish

In admonishing Roman bishops for preoccupation with temporal affairs, Luther does not mean to overlook the wide range of duties in carrying out the ministry of the Word. The heavy burden of all functions of the pastoral office can overwhelm the pastor and calls for support.

Our Lutheran forefathers do not prescribe how the church's ministry is to be organized. In evangelical freedom, they carefully arranged all sorts of offices to assist the primary and foundational office of preaching the Word. A description of these offices includes, "the work of pastors, teachers, preachers, lectors, chaplains, sacristans, schoolmasters, and whatever other work belongs to these offices."<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup>LW 46:219f.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup>LW 40:36.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup>LW 46:220.

<sup>62</sup>LW 39:313f.

<sup>63</sup>LW 46:220.

From the outset, Luther recognized at least two offices as basic to each parish, a pastor and a sacristan (*Kuester*). In cities even more positions were necessary. The city church at Wittenberg was served by eleven persons, each with distinct duties. In addition to Pastor Bugenhagen, there were three deacons, one chaplain to serve the village churches attached to the parish, a teacher for the Latin school and his three assistants, and a teacher for the girl's school and his assistant, who at the same time served as sacristan. The deacons and chaplain assisted the pastor. The teacher was responsible to the pastor, while his three co-laborers served under his direction.<sup>64</sup>

But in organizing the parish, the confessors never lost sight of one principle: All offices in the church must relate to the one great spiritual office, the ministry of the Word. In the Lutheran view, the gospel and its mandates shaped the ministry. The spiritual office mandated by Christ for his church<sup>65</sup> was the office "on which all others depend and from which they follow."<sup>66</sup>

This principle helped them to enunciate their position on the division of authority within the pastoral ministry. "The Gospel requires of those who preside over the churches," Melancthon writes, "that they preach the Gospel, remit sins, administer the sacraments, and in addition, exercise jurisdiction, that is, excommunicate those who are guilty of notorious crimes and absolve those who repent.... This power belongs by divine right [*iure divino*] to all who preside over the churches, whether they are called pastors, presbyters, or bishops."<sup>67</sup>

When the office is freely and carefully divided among those who hold the preaching office, that is, however, a human arrangement. "The distinction between grades of bishops and presbyters (or pastors) is by human authority [*iure humano*]," Melancthon concludes.<sup>68</sup> The rule in the church still belongs to Christ, who rules as the Head over the body. To this Luther nodded assent: "Consequently the church cannot be better governed and maintained than by having us all live under one head, Christ, and by having all the bishops equal in office (however they may differ in gifts) and diligently joined together in unity of doctrine, faith, sacraments, prayer, works of love, etc."<sup>69</sup>

Other division of work in the church's ministry can best be illustrated by two examples, the office of schoolteachers and of deacons. Both public offices played a vital role in the conduct of the public ministry; the one in training youth for life in the church and the nation, the other in response to physical needs in the parish.

The Reformer's efforts in reviving formal education are well known. In "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," he based his appeal chiefly on teaching children God's Word. "If the Scriptures and learning disappear," he asks with pointed rhetoric, "what will remain in the German lands but a disorderly and wild crowd, indeed, a pigsty and mob of wild beasts?"<sup>70</sup>

The key to renewing religious education lay in the schoolteacher's office. In God's sacred order, this office originated in the hierarchy of family. As "every parent is a bishop in his own house," and "it is the duty of father and mother to teach children and lead them to God,"<sup>71</sup> the schoolteacher takes the parents' place in training the child. The school is the extension of the home. "Out of the authority of parents all other authority is

---

<sup>64</sup>KO I, 700ff.

<sup>65</sup>CA V.

<sup>66</sup>LW 39: 313f.

<sup>67</sup>WA TR 60-62, p 330.

<sup>68</sup>WA TR 63, p 331.

<sup>69</sup>SA II, IV:9; (*Trig.*, 473; Tappert, 300).

<sup>70</sup>LW 46:217.

<sup>71</sup>WA 17 II,167.

derived and developed. Where a father is unable by himself to bring up his child, he calls upon a schoolmaster to teach him."<sup>72</sup>

Thus the office of the schoolteacher had a vital role in the church's public ministry of the Word. In praise of the schoolteacher's office, Luther freely admits, "If I could leave the preaching office and my other duties, or had to do so, there is no other office I would rather have than that of schoolmaster or teacher; for I know that next to that of preaching, this is the best, greatest, and most useful office there is."<sup>73</sup>

The role of the deacons was different. Deacons were responsible primarily for the administration of the parish's temporal affairs. "There ought to be deacons for the church," Luther writes, "men who should be of service to the bishop and at his recommendations have control in the church in external matters."<sup>74</sup> Different from the schoolteacher's role, the deacon registered and cared for the poor, visited the sick, managed church property, and occasionally preached.

### **Afterword: The ministry in Wittenberg**

What remains are several observations on the evangelical ministry in the practice of the confessors. In our review of ministry in the minds and lives of the confessors, we need to bear two things in mind. First of all, the Lutheran confessors were children of their age. They reformed the ministry in an age when the model of government was aristocratic rather than democratic, and the reform was conducted through the temporal authority in a church-state combination. The evangelical freedom and practical flexibility with which they made changes reflect the transitional character of the times. For this reason we need to pay close attention to what is essential to the ministry and where we exercise evangelical freedom by honoring past forms or creating new ones that serve the gospel.

Secondly, we undoubtedly noticed in the historical review that special forms of ministry in that day may not match the names or descriptions we have in our day. Naming remained secondary to the gospel cause. The church orders in Wittenberg explicitly noted the minister's bondage to God's freeing Word and promise. "Persons called to the preaching office and thus who perform the high divine office of teaching the Gospel rightly and offering the sacrament according to God's command—whether they are called bishops, ministers, clergy, *seelsorgers*, or pastors—are bound to obey God's command in all matters that the Gospel bids or forbids."<sup>75</sup>

There was a special reason for that injunction. The ministry of the gospel is not natural to the ways of the world. By nature people understand neither the law nor the gospel. But because "it is Christ's office to rebuke sin and to forgive sin... we preachers are to assist our Lord God in the administration of this office and on his behalf also to rebuke and forgive sin. Preachers who do not rebuke sin unlock hell and lock heaven. In like manner, preachers who do not forgive sin also unlock hell and lock heaven. This is why both messages should be preached: Sin should be rebuked and sin should be forgiven."<sup>76</sup>

That is the essence of the public ministry in the minds and lives of the confessors. God keep the ministry of the Word central to the church's life and work!

---

<sup>72</sup>LC, Fourth Commandment, 141; (*Trig.*, 621; Tappert, 384).

<sup>73</sup>LW 46:253.

<sup>74</sup>LW 28:296.

<sup>75</sup>KO I, 217.

<sup>76</sup>Sermon on Luke 7, 36ff in WA 41, 647.

## References

### *Sources*

*Concordia Triglotta (Trig.)*. Minneapolis: The Mott Press, 1955 reprint.

*Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*. Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959.

*Luther's Works (LW)*. (The American Edition) Selected Volumes. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1955ff.

Tappert, T.G., *The Book of Concord*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959.

Sehling, E., *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts*. Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1979 reprint. KO, Vol 1.

### *Works*

Elert, W., *The Structure of Lutheranism*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962.

Fagerberg, H., *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions 1529-1537*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972.

Marquart, K. E., *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*. Fort Wayne: International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990.

Maurer, W., *Gemeindezucht, Gemeindeamt, Konfirmation*. Kassel: Johannes Staude-Verlag, 1940.

Maurer, W., *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

Mildenberger F., *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.

Sasse, H., *We Confess: The Church*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986.

Schlink, E., *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961.