

Doctrinal Brief: "Forms Of Ministry"

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In various doctrinal discussions in recent years it has become apparent that the WELS's use of the term "forms of ministry" is sometimes unclear to people. The problem is compounded when we are working across a language barrier and the other language does not have a close equivalent of the English word "forms." The complexity of the problem is increased by the wide range of usage of the word "form." In my English dictionary there are 31 meanings listed under the noun "form" and another 14 under the verb.

Among the many definitions of "form" are the following: "a particular condition, character, or mode in which something appears, such as water, ice, steam," or "a set, prescribed, or customary mode or method of doing something." The last of the two meanings cited seems close to the sense in which the term is used in the expression "forms of ministry."

The expression "forms of ministry" is a good term because the English word "form" implies both that there is a oneness that unites all of the various forms and that there are differences that distinguish the various forms.¹

One Ministry

The WELS "Theses on the Church and Ministry" emphasize the oneness of the ministry. "Christ instituted one office in His Church, the Ministry of the Gospel. It is the task of proclaiming the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.... This office or service, the ministry of the keys has been given to the Church, i.e., to the believers individually and collectively" (*Doctrinal Statements*, p 48). Christ has given only one assignment to the church, to preach the gospel. Everything else the church does, even the preaching of the law, has value only as it supports the church's one mission: to preach the gospel.

This one ministry of the gospel may be exercised privately by all believers as well as by publicly called ministers of the Word. The same gospel is used in both private and public ministry. The same divine authority stands behind the gospel when it is used privately and when it is used publicly. The establishment of the public ministry, however, is not an adiaphoron, left to the freedom of the church. It is a command of God. The WELS theses say, "The public ministry constitutes a special *God-ordained* way of practicing the one ministry of the Gospel" (*Doctrinal Statements*, p 49).

Various Forms

The WELS theses say, "The one public ministry of the Gospel may assume various forms as circumstances demand. The specific forms in which Christians establish the public ministry have not been prescribed by the Lord to His New Testament Church" (*Doctrinal Statements*, p 50).

The new edition of *This We Believe* says, "We look upon the pastoral office as the most comprehensive form of the public ministry of the Word" (p 30). Pastors are trained and called to provide comprehensive spiritual oversight of the congregation. They preach, teach, and counsel. They administer the sacraments. They are shepherds to all of the members of the congregation. For this reason we call their ministry "comprehensive."

Nevertheless, the exact form and scope of ministry exercised by today's parish pastor is not specifically instituted by the Lord to the exclusion of other forms of public ministry (*WELS Theses*, II, D6). There is no divine command, comparable to the institution of baptism or the Lord's Supper, commanding the form which the public ministry of the Word should take in New Testament congregations. A congregation may have one pastor or three. Several pastors of one congregation may all share the same duties, or they may specialize in

¹ There is scriptural precedent for the term "forms of ministry," but the Greek expression used in 1 Corinthians 12:5 (διαίρέσεις διακονιῶν) stresses the differences of the forms of ministry rather than their similarity.

certain aspects of the ministry. One pastor may be head pastor, the others assistants. Other workers may be called to assist the pastor in more limited areas of ministry.

During the writing of *This We Believe* the writers considered several other adjectives for the pastoral ministry in addition to "comprehensive." The two that received the most consideration were "basic" and "foundational." These express a truth. If a congregation has only one called minister, it will normally be a pastor (assuming the availability of a pastor). As the work of the congregation increases, people may be called to assume a part of the work that had previously been done by the pastor. In this way the office of parish pastor may serve as the "base" or "foundation" for the creation of other forms of ministry. There are two reasons, however, why "basic" and "foundational" were not included. First, these two terms might be misunderstood as implying that other forms of the ministry are not forms of the ministry that was instituted by Christ, but are simply man-made auxiliaries to the pastoral office. Those who serve in any form of the ministry of the Word are called by Christ through the church. For this reason, they are serving not merely in man-devised offices, but in divine offices. A congregation may call such workers as catechists, teachers, deacons, or evangelists to assist the pastors. These workers too are called servants of Christ. This is what we mean when we say that the pastoral ministry is not instituted *in contrast to* or *to the exclusion of* other forms of the ministry. Second, it seems best to reserve the term "foundational" for the apostolic office, which was foundational in a sense that the pastoral ministry is not.

The divine institution of the New Testament ministry, therefore, can be compared to the divine institution of government. That government is instituted by God is directly stated in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2, but there are no specific commands or regulations concerning the form of government. Although kings are mentioned as an existing form of government, the divine institution is not limited to monarchy, but applies also to other forms developed by human beings. Therefore, specific forms of government are both divine institutions (Romans 13:1) and human institutions (1 Peter 2:13). The Bible mentions the office of king as an office that serves in the government divinely instituted by God. It does not mention presidents. No one can say that the USA does not have a government that is "established by God" (Romans 13:1) because it has presidents, not kings. One cannot say that governments of kings are instituted by God, but governments of presidents are not. In the same way, one cannot say that pastors are the only ministry instituted by God and that all other forms are not.²

The church today can choose to have various forms of ministers: bishops, pastors, head pastors, assistant pastors, deacons, missionaries, professors, administrators, and so on. It can also call members of the congregation to serve the church publicly as Sunday school teachers, evangelists, and so on. The church has the evangelical freedom to create new offices and to change old ones, to recognize and provide for specializations and concentrations among the various forms of the one gospel ministry.

The sameness of these various forms of ministry consists in two points: 1) the holders of all these offices or forms of ministry are serving in the one gospel ministry established by God; and 2) those who serve in all these forms of ministry are called by Christ through the church.

The differences between these various forms are in the scope of the work which the church assigns to them in its call. Some may be called to serve "in a comprehensive ministry of the Word and sacraments," as most pastors are. Others may be called to serve in a limited sphere, such as teaching the Word to children. Some pastors may be called to exercise general oversight of a congregation. Some pastors may be called to serve as

² Various forms of ministry existed in the New Testament churches. (1 Ti 3:2 and 8; 1 Tim 5:17; Eph 4:11; 1 Co 12:28; Ro 12:6-8, etc.). Among the forms named are apostles, prophets, evangelists, elders/overseers, pastors and teachers, and deacons. All of these men are specifically said to be serving in divinely established ministries (1 Co 12:28; Eph 4:11).

There were also different forms of public ministry in the Old Testament. Priests were differentiated from Levites, and there were various forms of ministry among the Levites, not all of which involved direct use of the Old Testament means of grace.

Various forms of ministry have been recognized throughout church history, including the time of the Reformation. Luther states this very clearly in his "Sermon on Keeping Children in School": The estate that I am thinking of is rather one which has the office of preaching and the service of the word and sacrament and which imparts the Spirit and salvation, blessings that cannot be obtained by any amount of pomp and pageantry. It includes the work of pastors, teachers, preachers, lectors, priests (whom men call chaplains), sacristans, schoolmasters, and whatever other works belong to these offices and persons (LW 46, p 220).

assistants to another pastor. Other ministers may be called to serve under the oversight of a pastor. In the dictionary definitions which we considered at the beginning of this article a "form" was described as a "set, prescribed, or customary mode or method of doing something." In a "form of ministry" the duties are set or prescribed by the call. In prescribing the duties of an office the church often follows forms which have been established by custom and tradition, but it is not bound to do so. The possible forms of ministry and the scope of individual calls are not prescribed by Christ, but left free to the church (except in so far as Scripture prescribes qualifications to serve in the ministry and sets limitations on the service of women in the ministry of the Word.)

In using the expression "forms of ministry" we are attempting to emphasize both the points of identity and the points of difference between the various offices of ministry.

Is there some other word which would be an improvement over "forms" of ministry? During the writing of *This We Believe* the writers tried hard to find one without success. Different "types" of ministry seems to downplay the fact that there's only one ministry given to the church—the gospel ministry. (The word "types" might be appropriate if the word "ministry" is being used in a wide sense which includes forms of service that do not involve the Word.) There is ample precedent for the use of the term "grades" of ministry (the Latin *gradus*), but this can easily be misunderstood in a hierarchical sense. In fact it is often translated "ranks" in English translations of the dogmaticians. Lutheran writers have also often used the term "orders," the term common among Roman Catholics. "Branches of ministry" expresses the truth that forms of ministry are branches of one tree, the gospel ministry, and the fact that other forms usually have fewer of the duties of the ministry than the trunk from which they grow (that is, they are less comprehensive than the apostolic ministry or the pastoral ministry). It could, however, be misunderstood as implying that the pastoral ministry is the one divine trunk unto which human branches are grafted. Though the term "forms of ministry" may not be entirely adequate, it is very difficult to find a better term.

The new edition of *This We Believe* says, "We believe that the church has the freedom to establish various forms within the one ministry of the Word, such as pastors, teachers, and staff ministers. Through its call the church in Christian liberty designates the place and scope of service" (p 30). This statement emphasizes both the oneness of the ministry and the different forms in which that one ministry may be practiced.