

Author And The Ministry

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Author: Right or Wrong

EUGENE F. KLUG

A Response To The Leuenberg Concord

TRANSLATED BY JOHN DRICKAMER

The Outside Limits Of Lutheran  
Confessionalism In Contemporary  
Biblical Interpretation

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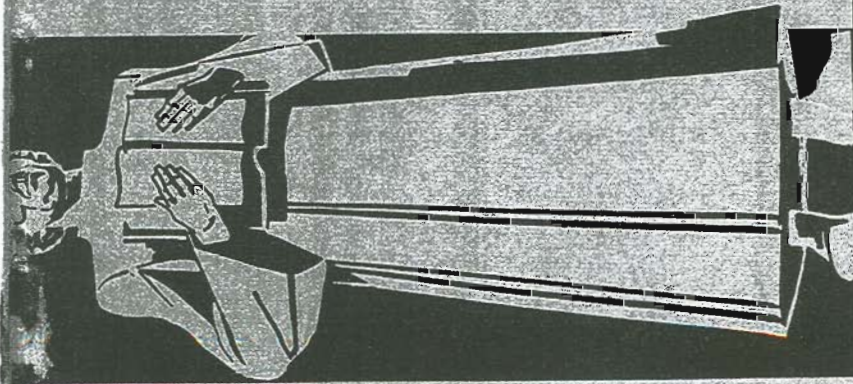
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# Luther And The Ministry\*

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I. ACCORDING TO LUTHER, *the ministerial office in the church is first of all a service: The minister is a servant of the Word of God.*

In support of this, consider the following statements of Luther:

"My office, and that of every preacher and minister, does not consist of any sort of lordship but in serving you so that you learn to know God. My office is merely a service . . . (47; 368, 1537).

*"Episcopi enim successoresque Apostolorum non dominationes sed ministeria habent. Servi vocati Ecclesiae Christi."* (7; 753, 28).

"The bishops or preachers are not the heads or the lords of the bridegroom of this church but servants, friends, and, as the word 'bishop' says, supervisors, stewards or elders (26; 449f., 1528).

This service is rendered to the Word:

*"Ministerium Ecclesiasticum . . . proprie est non nisi ministerium verbi."* (6, 566, 32).

*"Ministerium verbi facit ministros, non ministri ministerium verbi. Verbum das thuts* (39; II; 182).

The ministry of the Word is the highest and greatest of all in the church. The whole strength of the ecclesiastical order consists of it. For without the Word there is nothing of substance in the church and everything in it depends upon the Word alone (*sine verbo nihil constat in ecclesia et per solum verbum omnia constant*. 12; 173, 4; 10 III; 170, 5).

"Since the church owes to the Word of God its birth, nourishment, protection, and strength, it is obvious that it cannot be without the word; if it is without the word, it ceases to be the church" (11; 408.8).

"The church owes its birth to the Word of Promise through faith and by the same word it is nourished and protected. That is, the church is constituted by the promises of God. For the Word is incomparably higher than the church." (6; 514, 1).

From this it follows, that the ministry is a *high* office, precisely because it is a *service*.

*"Ich bin ja gewiss, dass mein Wort nicht mein, sondern Christus' Wort sei."* (8; 683, 12; 1523).

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\*The following recent studies contain exhaustive treatments of this theme: Hans Storch, *DAS ALLGEMEINE PRIESTERTUM BEI LUTHER*, Munchen, 1953; Vilmos Vajta, *DIE THEOLOGIE DES GOTTESDIENSTES BEI LUTHER*, Lund, 1952; Eng. transl.: *LUTHER ON WORSHIP*, Philadelphia, 1958. (Excellent). Klaus Tüchel, *Luthers Auffassung von geistlichen Amt*. *LUTHER JAHRBUCH* 25 (1958). Wilhelm Brunotte, *DAS GEISTLICHE AMT BEI LUTHER*, Berlin 1959 (one-sided) Hellmut Lieberg, *AMT UND ORDINATION BEI LUTHER UND MELANCHTHON*, Gottingen, 1962 (Exhaustive). Gosta Hok, *Luther's Doctrine of the Ministry*, *SCOTTISH JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY* 7 (1954, 16-40); Brian A. Gerrish, *Priesthood and Ministry in the Theology of Luther*, *CHURCH HISTORY* 36 (1965), 404-422 (a critical discussion). Wilhelm Pauck, *The Ministry in the Time of the Reformation*, chap. 7 of *THE HERITAGE OF THE REFORMATION*, New York, 1968, 101-143.

All references given in this address are to the Weimar edition of Luther's works. Where the translation of Luther's words is not taken over from the standard American editions of Luther's works, it is my own.

"Wenn man den Prediger höret, so höret man Gott selbst" (4 298, 36;).

Not directly but *indirectly*:

"*Tibi sumus dei larvae et unser Herr Gottes netzige Hand*" (4: 457,4; 1535).

The preacher is subject to the word and he does not speak in his own name but in that of God and Christ and, because of this, he has an office of very high authority.

"All who bring the Word of God, who are preachers and ministers of the Word are called messengers (or angels) of God . . . is a very great glory for a miserable human being to be called a messenger of God and to have his name in common with the heavenly spirits." (13; 538; 1525).

Luther applied this insight to himself and his own person and work. It filled him with a sense of mission and authority. He knew himself to be a minister (servant) and steward. He did not feel himself to be anybody's head when he served as a preacher in Wittenberg, but he claimed high authority for himself because he was Doctor of Holy Scripture. "I am a Doctor of Holy Scripture" he once said in a sermon, "more learned than the pope." (45, 310; 1537)

Because he relied on the authority of Scripture which he was sure he understood and which he felt called upon and sent out to interpret, he knew himself to be superior to the pope. Thus he claimed for himself the right to ordain and to institute others in the office of the ministry of the Word.

When he ordained his friend Nicholas Amsdorf as bishop of Naumburg in 1542, he said among other things:

"I know nothing good to say for myself and much less to glory in. Like all men I was born in sin and death under the devil and I lead a life that I wish could be better, even though I am no longer under the domination of the devil. If there is anything good in me this is due not to me but to my dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. His gifts to me I shall not deny, namely that I understand the Holy Scripture even though only slightly yet much better than the pope and all who belong to him, for they are hostile to the Holy Scripture and God's Word and do not know what they say or institute, or what they should do and what not. Therefore I also know how to consecrate a Christian bishop." (52, 256; 13).

So everything revolves around the point that "the office of the ministry or of preaching consists of this: to give and to proclaim (*darreichen*) the gospel according to Christ's commandment." (38; 238, 20, 1533).

It was Luther's firm conviction that the ministry was essential to the church and Christian faith and life. As we consider what was implied in this for him, we should keep in mind his statement (which is contained in the treatise on Councils and Churches, 1538) which reads:

"We must have bishops, ministers or preachers who publicly offer these four means of salvation: the sermon, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Office of the Keys (*Heiltum*) on behalf and in the name of the church and even more because of the institution of

this office by Christ (*von wegen und im Namen der Kirche, viel mehr aber aus Einsetzung Christi*) as Paul says in Eph. 4 (50; 632, 35).

If we want to understand Luther's views of the ministry, we have to pay major attention to the assertion he makes here that the ministers fulfill their functions and duties as servants of the word 1) on behalf and in the name of the church and 2) even more because of the institution of Christ.

II. *The Word of God on which the church depends and to which the ministry is bound in service is the Christ who makes himself known through the Scriptures and through the living words of Biblical preaching.*

Luther's central concern was the Word of God as the Holy of Holies (*das heiligtumb über alle heiligtumb*), indeed it is the only one that we Christians know and have (30 I; 145, 20f).

For Luther, the Word of God had three aspects which he clearly distinguished: Christ, the Scripture, and the sermon. He did not separate them from one another, but he rather correlated them with one another. When he defined and interpreted the ministry as the service of the word of God, he related it sometimes to Christ, sometimes to the Bible, and sometimes to the proclamation of the gospel in preaching and on other occasions to all three together, for he understood them as belonging to one another.

Throughout his career he held this view. In the first course he taught as a professor of Biblical theology in Wittenberg, an exposition of the Psalms, he affirmed that the gospel, which he identified with Christ or with the Biblical message, or with the proclamation of Christian preaching, was the most important possession of the church. He called it "the royal sceptre by which Christ rules his church and his kingdom." (3; 32, 2). At the end of his career, he spoke of Christ as the chief preacher (*Hauptprediger*) and of doctors and preachers as his instruments and tongues. "He alone", he said, "is the single true eternal baptist, who daily gives his baptism" (namely his gifts of salvation) "by our" (his ministers') "action and service" (47; 451, 21, 1540).

Hence Luther identified the preacher with Christ and God's word.

"By the minister's mouth we hear Christ himself talk with us giving us order (38; 240, 20). (*Wir hören Christum selbst durch Pfarrhers mund mit uns reden und befehlen*). "*Quando audis verbum, audis deum*" (37, 136, 6).

"Yes, I hear the sermon, but who is preaching? The minister? No, indeed! You do not hear the minister. True, the voice is his, but my God is speaking the Word which he preaches or speaks. Therefore, I should honor the Word of God that I may become a good pupil of the Word" (47; 229; 1540).

At his table, Luther once said: "Listen, brother, God, the creator of heaven and earth, speaks with you through his preachers; it is he who baptizes, instructs, absolves you through the ministry

of his sacraments. These words are not words of Plato or Aristotle but God himself is speaking." (I, 4; No. 4812 (1542)).

The ministry is therefore chiefly actualized in preaching and also in other functions which convey to men the spiritual gifts of Christ, namely the administration of the sacraments, teaching, and pastoral care. In Luther's view, they all give to believers the assurance of the divine forgiveness of sins.

Luther was amazed at the fact that the ministry thus understood had been preserved throughout the ages, even under the Papacy which, he believed, had horribly disturbed and upset it by dividing the church into clergy and laity and by ruling it through *hierarchical* priestly powers instead of maintaining it by the service of the word.

"Christ has been in action here," he wrote, "with his miraculous power and through and despite this horrible disturbance (*grewel*), he has preserved the calling to the ministry in his holy city (*in seiner heiligen stete*). For the ministerial or preaching office has at all times been provided for and maintained above and beyond papal ordination (*cresem*, anointing), by princes, cities, bishops, and abbots." (38; 236, 3, 1533). Thus, he said, there had also been preserved baptism, the preaching of the gospel in the vernacular tongues, absolution, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the office of the Keys, and public prayer. "Where such things have remained, there certainly has remained the church and some saints, for they all constitute the order and the fruits of Christ . . ." (38; 221, 18; 1533).

### III. *The ministry presupposes and is an exercise of the universal or common priesthood of all believers.*

The distinct and unique feature of Luther's conception of the Christian ministry in his teaching on the universal priesthood of believers: Every Christian is a priest by virtue of his baptism and his faith.

Luther did not express his opposition to the office of the priesthood under the papacy where the faithful are given a lower and subordinate position in the church (they are the *subditi* or subjects and the priests are the *rectores* or rectors) by affirming, as many maintain, that all Christians are equal as *laymen* among whom some are set apart for the office of the ministry, and in particular as preachers. But he asserted that all Christians, by virtue of their faith and baptism are *priests for one another*, as such entitled to exercise the functions of servants (ministers) of the word. The church as the congregation of believers constitutes a common priesthood. Every believer is a fellow-priest with Christ and with his fellow-Christians. They all share Christ's priesthood with one another and some among them are set apart in order to assume the public and divinely appointed office of the ministry.

"All Christians are truly of spiritual rank, not only a few, and all are ministers but not all are called upon to exercise the public function of the ministry." (6; 407, 13).

"All who believe that Christ is a priest (*pfarrer*) for them in

heaven, certainly are true priests (*pfarren*) wherever they are. All this happens by faith (*der glaub muss alles thun*). It alone is the right priestly office" (6; 370, 16).

"One who does not believe, is no priest" (12; 316, 26f). And everyone who is baptized is a priest (38, 230). "Every baptized Christian is a priest already, not by appointment or ordination from the pope or any other man, but because Christ himself has begotten him a priest and has given birth to him in baptism." (41; 205f, 1538).

"Anyone, therefore, who knows himself to be a Christian, may be certain and acknowledge, that we all are equally priests, which is to say, that we have the same power (*habere potestatem*) in the word and every sacrament" (6, 566, 6). This means: "If I call you a Christian, I call you at once also a priest who can give the sacrament, intercede with God, and judge about doctrine" (15, 720, 27). Because the Word is offered and given to all Christians, all priestly function or the one spiritual priesthood is extended to them. They all have authority to judge teaching (10 I 1; 140.20; 10 I 2; 290, 10); they have the right to preach (12; 171, 18), to administer baptism (12; 181, 23) and the Lord's Supper (12; 182, 19), and they may offer prayers of intercession (8, 886, 31). Indeed, this universal priesthood of believers is complete only in brotherly forbearance, help, and intercession (6, 131, 14; 2; 745, 20).

For Luther this doctrine was an eminently social one. He said: "*Also ist ein yglicher Christ ein Konig fur sich selber und ein priester fur andere* (16, 407, 33); (every Christian, therefore, is a King for himself and a priest for others). By this he meant to say, in accordance with his basic assertion in the treatise "On Christian Liberty," that, because of his faith, a Christian is a free man and subject to none, and because of the love in which his faith is actualized, he is a servant and subject to everyone else.

But now it is noteworthy that Luther added to all this an important qualification: "It is true," he said, "that all Christians are priests but not all are pastors (*Pfarrer*). For to be a pastor one not only must be a Christian and a priest but must have an office and a field of work committed to him. This call and command makes pastors and preachers." (30 I; 211; 1530). "All Christians are priests, but not all are pastors." (31 I; 211, 17; *alle Christen sind Priester, aber nicht alle Pfarrer*).

In his reformation treatise addressed to the German nobility in 1520, Luther gave a full statement on this his understanding of the task and status of one appointed to the pastoral ministry: "Whoever emerges from Baptism may boast that he is already consecrated priest, bishop and pope, although it is not seemly for everybody to exercise the office. Nay, just because we are all in like manner priests, no one should put himself forward and *undertake without our election and consent* to do what is in the power of all of us. For what is common to all of us no one dare take upon himself without the will and command of the others; and if it were to happen that one chosen for such an office were deposed for misconduct, he would be just what he was before he held the office. A priest in

Christendom (i.e. in the church) is nothing else than an office-holder" (6; 407).

Almost twenty years later, he expressed the same opinion: ". . . although we are all priests, this does not mean that all of us can preach, teach, and rule. Certain ones of the multitude (*Haufe*) must be selected and set aside for such an office. [Such a one is] a servant of all the others who are priests. When he is no longer able to teach and serve . . . he once more becomes part of the common multitude of Christians. His office is conveyed to someone else, and he becomes a Christian like any other . . . The preaching office is no more than a public service which happens to be enforced upon someone by the entire congregation, all members of which are priests." (41, 210; 1538).

The minister is not separated from the congregation or the rest of Christians when he assumes his office. He is not set apart from the rest by an indelible character (*character indelibilis*) as the teaching of the Roman Church maintains; he remains bound to the consent of the congregation. "*Sacerdotes vero quos vocamus ministri sunt ex nobis elect, qui nostro nomine omnes faciant et sacerdotium nihil aliud est quam ministerium.*" (6; 564, 6, 1520; The priests whom we call are ministers elected from among us, who in all their functions act in our name. The priesthood is nothing else than a ministry, a service).

The occupant of the ministerial office, therefore, does not speak in his own name, but he is the mouth of the congregation (*der Mund der Gemeinde*, 38, 247, 28) and in all he does he acts in place of and by the command and will of the congregation (8; 253, 29; 10 III; 396, 1). Indeed he acts on behalf and in the name of all who have the same right (12; 189, 21), so that no bad confusion may arise in God's people and no Babylon in the church but that all may be done in an orderly manner (*non turpis sit confusio in populo Dei et Babylon quadam fiat in Ecclesia, sed omnia secundum ordinem fiant*).

In Luther's opinion, the ministry cannot be separated from the priesthood which all believers have in common. It is an office which is administered by the will and consent of the congregation and on its behalf and in its name. But—the congregation which calls and elects its minister has *not created* the ministerial office!

IV. *The minister as the servant of the Word occupies his office because God has instituted and created it through Christ. It has prevailed in the church from the beginning in connection with the succession of believers through the succession of ministers, starting with the apostles.*

The ministry is holy and divine (38; 425, 1). It is a divine institution (30 II; 598, 33) and its chief purpose, according to the will of God, is the proclamation of the word, "The ministry of the gospel," Luther wrote in 1543 to the congregation in *Creuzburg*, ". . . belong to God our Lord, who has given and instituted it for our salvation . . . You are not lords over preachers and the ministry; you have not established the office. God alone has done so."

(Br. 10; 255, 25). By the will of God, Christ began or founded the office of preaching the gospel (28, 155, 2). He sent out preachers and he still maintains the office among men (41; 187, 24). Luther frequently spoke of the preachers as "successors of the apostles." (c.g. 21; 284, II; 41; 123, 35).

He regarded it as impossible to think of the church without the preaching ministry, just as he could not think of anyone being and becoming a Christian without the word. So for him the Word or the Gospel and the office of the ministry belonged together. "This office will remain," he wrote, "and there will be no other preaching office. But the persons do not remain; they die. Therefore we must always have new preachers, and this does not happen without means. The office as such, i.e. the Word of God, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper come directly from Christ; but after that Christ is no longer on earth. So there is a different sending which is by men though not of men. Thus we are sent, and we also elect others and put them in the office. Sending is from God . . . though he does this through men" (47; 191f., 1539).

The means that God uses, according to Luther, in order to maintain the preaching office is the call (*vocatio*) which is extended through men. He attributed great significance to this. He distrusted those (i.e. the "sectaries") who undertook preaching from a direct, immediate leading of the Spirit and he regarded the orderly call of a local congregation or its representatives as much more reliable because he believed it to be the objective expression of the divine will.

"God now calls all of us to the ministry of the Word by a mediate call," he said in his Lectures on Galatians in 1531, "it is a call which takes place through means, through men . . . We should highly commend it because of the sectaries who despise it and boast of another calling whereby they say the Spirit impels them to teach . . . I have no permission to leave this appointed place of mine and go to another city where I am not called, and there to preach . . ." (40 I; 59, 1531).

V. *One becomes a minister through an external, mediate call (vocatio) to service extended by a congregation or its spokesmen or representatives and through ordination by other preferably experienced ministers. This ordination which must be preceded by an earnest examination of the candidate testing him for fitness\* for the office and the functions of the ministry is the confirmation of the call. In connection with the observance of the age-old usage of the laying on of hands ordination constitutes the introduction to the ministerial office.*

All Christians are born and called by their baptism for and to the ministry (12; 191, 37). They have a general call (*vocatio generalis*) which gives them the right to preach and to administer the sacraments. But there is also the special call (*vocatio specialis*)

\*It should be stated here that Luther strongly believed that this fitness must be obtained through education. He demanded that schools and universities should train young men for a "learned ministry."



by which some are called to the public office of preacher and pastor (31 I; 211, 19). This call is identical with an election.

The election of the congregation or, as Luther was also prepared to say, by the parish (he believed it to be in existence *iure divino*) makes a man a servant or minister, an office-holder, and caretaker (*Diener, Amtmann, Pflegehutter*) in the gospel and the sacraments (7; 631, 29; 633, 16, 1521). "Bishops and elders (Luther used these terms interchangeably with others like ministers and pastors) "are to be separated from the common mass of Christians in the same way as in secular government, where certain people of the citizenry or municipality are chosen and appointed as officials. One does not become a citizen by being elected burgo-master or judge, but one is elected to the office because one is already a citizen" (41; 207f., 1538).

From this Luther drew the following conclusion: *Ordinare non est consecrare. Si scimus pium nominem, extrahimus eum et danu in virtute verbi quod habemus, auctoritatem praedicandi verbum e dandi sacramenta. Hoc est ordinare.*" (15; 721, 3; to ordain is no the same as to consecrate; when we know a good man, we single him out and give him in virtue of the word which we have the authority of preaching the word and of giving the sacraments. This is ordaining).

Ordination (which Luther distinguished from consecration (*Priesterweihe*) is nothing else but the call and appointment to the ministerial office (38, 287, 7) and this ordination which is synonymous with the public, mediate call extended by a specific congregation, appoints one to the public divinely instituted office of preaching, teaching, and pastoral care.

Throughout his career, Luther insisted on this interconnection between the call and ordination. This is why he made so much in his own case of the fact that he had been promoted to the doctorate in theology and appointed to a preaching office in Wittenberg. "I have often said and still say that I would not take the wealth of the world for my doctorate. For truly I would finally have to lose courage and despair of the great weighty matter that rests on me if I had begun it as a sneak (*Schleicher*) without call or command. But now God and all the world must bear me witness that I have begun it publicly in the discharge of my doctorate and the office of the ministry and have brought it thus far with God's grace and help." (30 III; 522). Appointment to the office of the ministry, he thought must come to a man not from within him but from without him "We should carefully see to it that there is no evil design, that no one in any way obtrudes himself as a preacher, either to get a livelihood (*um Bauchs willen*) or to gain honor. . . . If you are learned and understand God's will and think that you would present it to others faithfully and profitably, then wait. If God wants it, he will have no trouble finding you." (17 II; 255). Or more drastically still, he advised: "*Si posses totam mundum convertere et scires quod que mortuos excitare, non tamen debes docere, nisi vocatus fueris et certus sis te vocatum.*" (17 I, 508, 20). If you are able to convert the whole world and if you know even how to bring the dead

to life, nevertheless you have no authority to teach unless you have received a call and know that you have been called).

The order of calling, examining, and ordaining ministers which gradually came into being at Wittenberg and Saxony (definitely since 1538) corresponded to the procedure which Luther defined at the beginning of Reformation in his tract "whether the congregation has the right to call and judge ministers": "We call the people together and by common veto choose a qualified man from our midst or as many as are necessary; these we then commend to the church and confirm with prayer and the laying on of hands. These we acknowledge and honor as legitimate bishops and ministers of the Word and believe without any doubt that what was done and carried out in this way by the common consent of believers who acknowledge and confess the gospel, was done and carried out by God." (12; 191, 1523).

We conclude therefore:

VI. *According to Luther's teaching, the nature of the Christian ministry is bipolar insofar as on the one hand, it presupposes and is the expression of the common priesthood of all believers, and, on the other hand, it is a divinely appointed office and function. There is no valid ministry in the church without a call by a congregation of Christians who extend this call representing the common priesthood of all believers. Nor is there a valid ministry in the church unless the one called is ordained to the office of preacher and pastor which is instituted by God through Christ. There is no ordination without a call, and no call is valid unless it is confirmed by ordination.*

### *A Random Thought*

"I suggest that you make a great fuss about First Communion. The children should send out invitations to relatives. The girls wear a white dress and also wear a white veil. The veil, as you know from St. Paul's Letter to Corinthians (1), is a liturgical vestment. At the Eucharist the female symbolizes the Ecclesia, the Bride of Christ. The male symbolizes Jesus Christ, the bridegroom. This also answers the question, "Should women be ordained to the Holy Ministry?" There is no Scriptural reason why she should not be ordained, but she can't celebrate or preach in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, for she symbolizes the Bride of Christ. That's what St. Paul meant."

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