



Luther's Concept of the Ministry: The Creative Tension

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Ordained ministry involves equipping the saints for ministry. The literature of several Lutheran denominations reflects this perspective. Presumably the pastor's role is to organize the resources in a congregation. The implication is that the ordained minister is primarily a facilitator.

This view of the minister as facilitator has gained widespread acceptance in the Lutheran Church. One need only raise the issue of what the ordained ministry is with those ordained in the last decade in order to have this observation confirmed. The recently published survey of American denominations' attitudes toward the ministry, entitled *Ministry in America*, provides statistical verification of the dominance of this view. Lutheran clergy rank only behind the United Church of Christ clergy in the endeavor to share congregational leadership with laity.¹

There are good reasons for contemporary Lutheran clergy to understand themselves in terms of this facilitator model. There seems to be theological justification for such a leadership style. The *Ministry in America* survey reflects the discomfort of many Lutherans with authoritarian leadership.² This is not surprising in view of the fact that some social analysts have noted that participatory leadership has become dominant in most American institutions.³

In spite of all this data, it is fair to say that to view the minister as a mere facilitator is not quite adequate—either practically or theologically. We speak of the priesthood of all believers, but the deference laity show to clergy is a fact of life. Additional survey results of Lutheran attitudes toward the ministry confirm that it exists.⁴ Lutheran laity indicate as much preference for the pastor to exercise authority as they do for the implementation of shared congregational leadership.

No one would advocate mere capitulation to the realities of parish life and a

¹*Ministry in America*, ed. David S. Schuller, Merton P. Strommen, and Milo L. Brekke (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) 209.

²*Ibid.*, 214-215.

³Christopher Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner, 1979) 313-314; cf. Lowell C. Green, "Change in Luther's Doctrine of the Ministry," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (1966) 173-174.

⁴Cf. *Ten Faces of Ministry*, ed. Milo P. Brekke, Merton P. Strommen, and Dorothy L. Williams (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 86ff., 119, 126.

passive deference to the clergy on the part of the laity. Nor would anyone wish to see the clergy's self-image return to a "Herr Pastor" style of leadership. (There are many positive elements in a concept of shared ministry.) But the fact is that Lutheran pastors are caught in a tension between two kinds of leadership expectations. They must be both facilitators and authority figures who

stand over against the congregation.

My contention is that this can be a creative tension. Pastors must learn to draw upon both models for ministry, each in its appropriate place. The reticence of some pastors to exercise authority openly in a legitimate way is not founded on proper theological grounds. Their hesitancy may be indicative of the church's unwillingness to break with cultural expectations about the nature of leadership. It is likely one more instance of Lutheranism opting for a kind of "cultural Christianity." In fact, there is adequate theological justification for embracing both models. A purpose of this essay is to show that both are implicit in the thought of Martin Luther (and that he interpreted the New Testament correctly in this regard). By studying how the Reformer employed each view of the ministry we can learn lessons about when it is best to exercise authority and when best to function as facilitator.

I

Recent scholarship has generally agreed that two lines of thought about the ordained ministry coexist in tension in Luther's writings.⁵ One finds him speaking of the ordained ministry as derived from the priesthood of all believers; yet in other places he speaks of the office as divinely instituted. That such a tension is present is not surprising. Luther's theology is characterized by tensions on many doctrinal *loci*. The question for interpreters is what to make of these tensions. Are they to be regarded as evidences of development in Luther's thought? In that case the themes characteristic of one period may be regarded as authoritative at the expense of the themes of the other period. This systematic way of interpreting Luther has predominated in most Lutheran theology since the Reformation. But it is preferable to interpret Luther in a different way, and that is to consider him on his own terms—not as a systematic theologian, but as a biblical theologian who appreciated Scripture's diversity. We can best understand him when we recognize that he functioned "pastorally." That is to say, he spoke about every doctrine in a variety of ways, depending upon the particular context/concern he was addressing.⁶

In view of the textual evidence it is surprising that this approach to Luther has not been more widely recognized. There are several autobiographical refer-

⁵A good survey of the secondary literature on this topic has been made by John Reumann, "Ordained Minister and Layman in Lutheranism," *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*, IV, eds. Paul C. Empie and Austin Murphy (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 230ff.; cf. also Helmut Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination bei Luther und Melancton* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1962).

⁶Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 286, has recognized this pastoral character of Luther's thought. For a full development of this approach, cf. Mark Ellingsen, *Luther in Context* (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1980). It is shown that variety in Lutheranism is a consequence of the fact that such theological variety is evident in Luther and the Confessions.

ences which illustrate the Reformer's sensitivity to the role which pastoral context played in shaping his theology. For example, once at a conversation over table he said to his student John Mathesius:

This [the relationship between law and gospel] shouldn't and can't be comprehended in a fixed rule. Christ himself preached [the law and the gospel] according to circumstances.⁷

This passage makes clear that there is no one way of distinguishing law and gospel for Luther. That varies according to the circumstances.

Luther's acknowledgment of his pastoral approach is also apparent in one of his most important works, the *Small Catechism*. There he says that when it comes to teaching the Ten Commandments the thing to do is to emphasize those Commandments "which seem to require special attention among the the people where you are."⁸ The Reformer makes a similar point elsewhere when he advises that certain portions of Scripture are not Word of God for us in given situations and ought to be avoided entirely at those times.⁹ Clearly Luther was aware of his propensity to emphasize certain theological themes in some circumstances and not in others.

The present issue, Luther's view of the ordained ministry, can function as a test case for further demonstrating Luther's pastoral approach to theology. We shall see that the two lines of thought in Luther about the ordained ministry are not peculiar to any particular period in his career. Rather both lines of thought are present throughout his career. Luther is actually quite consistent in his use of each. Each appears regularly when he addressed concerns that are comparable. It is by identifying his pattern of using these two lines of thought that we can gain insights for our ministry today about the appropriate leadership style for particular circumstances.

II

One may discuss tensions in Luther's concept of the ministry in regard to the functions he designates for the office. At some points he prefigures Melancthon's definition of ministry in terms of Word and sacrament.¹⁰ Elsewhere he defines it more broadly in terms of seven functions.¹¹ Our concern in this essay, however, is with the question of leadership style. For determining this the principal issue is authority: By whose authority does one preach the Word and administer the sacraments?

It is in answer to this question that the two lines of thought in Luther's concept of the ordained ministry have been identified. One finds him speaking in some places of the authority of the ordained ministry as derived from the univer-

⁷*Table Talk* (1540), WATR 5, 38, 9 (LW 54, 404); cf. *Commentary on Psalm 90* (1534), WA 40 III, 512, 3 (LW13, 93).

⁸*Small Catechism* (1529), Preface, 18. Quoted from *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore H. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 340.

⁹*How Christians Should Regard Moses* (1525), LW 35, 170-171 (WA 16, 384f., 33ff.); *Sermons on the First Book of Moses* (1527), WA 24, 12, 14.

¹⁰*Defense Against Catharinus* (1521), WA 7, 705-778; esp. 720, 39.

¹¹*Concerning the Ministry* (1523), WA 12, 179, 38-189 (LW 40, 21-34).

sal priesthood. Carried to its logical conclusion this view of the ministry's authority derived "from below" implies the model of minister as facilitator of the congregation—the non-directive kind of leadership style about which we have spoken. Yet one also finds the Reformer speaking of the office as divinely instituted, its authority derived "from above." This line of thought distinguishes pastor and laity and implies that the pastor is in charge. We now need to identify the presence of these lines of thought in Luther in order to provide rationale for employing both leadership styles (self-understandings) by contemporary Lutheran pastors and to see how Luther's use of these strands offers directions for reliance on each.

When most Lutherans reflect on Luther's view of the ordained ministry the notion of the universal priesthood usually comes to mind. The crucial text is 1 Peter 2:9, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into marvelous light." Luther appeals to this text in several places. Probably the most famous is in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. He writes:

We are all priests, as many of us as are Christians. But the priests, as we call them, are ministers chosen from among us. All that they do is done in our name.¹²

All that the ordained ministry does, it does in the name of the universal priesthood on behalf of the Church.

This theme appears frequently in Luther, particularly in his earliest writings. In his *Treatise to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520) he argues that ordination takes place only through the authority of the universal priesthood, not through the bishop's authority to ordain.¹³ Likewise, in his 1523 treatise *Concerning the Ministry*, and in several other treatises, this view of the ordained ministry appears.¹⁴

Luther's argument in these texts is quite familiar to Lutherans. All Christians have been made priests in their baptism. They are priests in the sense that Christians have been made people who deny themselves on behalf of their neighbor. In so doing they crucify (sacrifice) their old natures. It is this sacrifice which makes them priests.¹⁵

Since all Christians are priests, all share the same gifts and tasks. The ministry of Word and sacrament belongs to all. However, if every Christian preached and administered the sacraments there would be chaos. Thus Luther's commitment to good order in the church demanded that certain individuals be set aside to carry out these tasks. Preaching and administering the sacraments are tasks that belong to all Christians. Yet the ordained minister is the one called to carry

¹²*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) WA 6, 564, 12 (LW 36, 113).

¹³*Treatise to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520) WA 6, 407, 22ff. (LW 44, 127-128).

¹⁴*Concerning the Ministry* (1523) WA 12, 179, 15ff. (LW 40, 20-21); *Ibid.*, WA 12, 189, 17 (LW 40, 34); *Answer to the Hyperchristian Book* (1521), WA 7, 628ff., 6ff. (LW 39, 151ff.); *Dr. Luther's Retraction* (1521) WA 8, 253, 3ff. (LW 39, 236-237); *That A Christian Assembly Has the Right* (1523) WA 11,414, 1ff. (LW 39, 312).

¹⁵*The Misuse of the Mass* (1521) WA 8, 492, 21ff. (LW 36, 145-146); *Lenten Sermons* (1525) WA 1711, 7, 1ff.

these tasks out publicly for the good of the congregation.¹⁶ The authority for ministry comes from below, from the universal priesthood.

We have already alluded to the implications of this kind of understanding of the ordained ministry. It means that pastors are involved in a representative ministry. It is common to say that Luther holds a functional view of the ministry—that Lutherans set pastors apart from the laity simply on the basis of the different work ordained ministers do. The sole difference between pastors and lay persons is the special work which pastors do.¹⁷ Yet even in doing that, pastors are involved in a representative activity. All that pastors do they do in the name of the Christian communities which they represent. Of course the pastors' performance of these special tasks does

not release lay people from the same responsibilities. As priests, all Christians are called to speak the Word of God, share in the sacraments, and participate in the body of Christ. But pastors do this publicly as representatives of the whole community.

Collegiality is the watchword with this model. The pastor represents all Christians and aims to facilitate the sharing of the priestly activities by all. Of course, in light of the concerns Luther was addressing, that is not surprising. In every text where he affirms the universal priesthood and the view of ordained ministry derived from it, he is engaged in a polemic against papal authority and the clericalism and temporal power of the medieval church.¹⁸ It should be noted that there is a kind of incipient legalism behind such clerical tendencies. In those instances the church tends to be defined in terms of what human beings (the clergy) do rather than in terms of God's action. Yet at the same time clericalism can undercut Christian responsibility. One is led to assume that proclamation is solely the business of the pastor. In face of these tendencies, the view of the ministry as grounded in the universal priesthood seems rightly stressed.

There are many strengths associated with this view of the ministry. Minimizing the difference between clergy and laity promotes collegiality, shared ministry. Yet unlike some modern appropriations of the universal priesthood, Luther's view does not rule out the priority of a ministry of Word and sacrament by the pastor. In fact, Luther emphasizes a ministry of Word and sacrament even more. Because the ministry of Word and sacrament belongs to the entire church, it is the responsibility of all Christians to preach the Word and live out the sacrament in their lives. It is in this sense that an emphasis on the universal priesthood is also pertinent when considering the witness one makes to God in the private sphere—how one lives the Christian life.¹⁹ This emphasis on collegiality is a very real strength. When applied, this model of the ordained ministry would set a definite tone for one's leadership style. Because there is no difference between clergy and laity except for the different work they do, pastors who embody this model

¹⁶*Concerning the Ministry* (1523) WA 12, 189, 17ff. (LW 40, 34-35); *Dr. Luther's Retraction* (1521) WA 8, 253, 29 (LW 39, 237).

¹⁷*Treatise to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520) WA 6, 408, 26ff. (LW 44, 129-130).

¹⁸*Ibid.*, WA 6, 563f., 27ff. (LW 36, 112), and all texts cited thus far from Luther. This characterization of the context for Luther's understanding of the ministry in relation to the universal priesthood has been offered by several scholars; cf. Ruben Josefson, "The Ministry as an Office in the Church," *This Is the Church*, ed. Anders Nygren (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1952) 272.

¹⁹*That A Christian Assembly Has the Right* (1523) WA 11, 410, 29 (LW 39, 308). Cf. Brian Gerrish, "Priesthood and Ministry in the Theology of Luther," *Church History* 34 (1965) 416-417.

will understand themselves first and foremost as one of the members of their parish.

There is one major difficulty with this model. If one is serious about the representative character of the ordained ministry (so that the pastor understands himself or herself as a representative of the congregation being served) then it seems that one can never stand over against a congregation by taking unpopular stands. Since one cannot truly represent a congregation when taking a stand contrary to its members, there seem to be no resources in this model to allow one to assume this prophetic role.²⁰ Of course Luther was at no point in his career suggesting that the church is an autonomous entity. The pastor cannot be understood as a mere functionary of a congregation's wishes and wants. Rather ordained pastors are called to represent

the church insofar as the church acts under divine command and its daily life is properly regulated. The problem is, though, that someone must determine when the church is not being the church, not subject to divine command. If pastors make that judgment they can only do so by assuming a critical distance from the congregation they serve, that is, by standing over against that congregation. Thus Luther's appreciation of this prophetic and regulatory role inevitably led him to modify the first view—the pastor as representative of the universal priesthood—in favor of another way of describing the ordained ministry.

III

The second strand in Luther's view of the ordained ministry predominates later in his career. Instead of talking about the authority of the office as derived from the universal priesthood, Luther argues that the ministry's authority is given directly by God. It is instituted by Christ Himself.²¹ This fact sets the minister apart from the universal priesthood. As such, Luther is quite clear at some points in distinguishing clergy from laity.²² His attributing sacramental status to ordination further indicates that the Reformer embraced this second view of the ministry.²³ It is quite evident that a leadership style in which the clergy takes charge, assumes a prophetic role, has a legitimate theological basis in Lutheranism.

The crucial question for our purposes is why this second view of the ordained ministry evolved, and whether it represents a contradiction of the first view of the minister's authority as derived from the universal priesthood. I have already suggested that contrary to much popular opinion this second view is not merely the product of a development in Luther's thought.²⁴ One can find him

²⁰Cf. L. Green, "Change in Luther's Doctrine of the Ministry," 177.

²¹*Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528) WA 26, 504, 30 (LW 37, 364); *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530) WA 30 II, 526-527, 34ff. (LW 46, 219). *Augustana V* takes a similar view. For additional references, cf. P. Althaus, *Theology*, 324; Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962) 344.

²²*Commentary on Psalm 82* (1530) WA 31 I, 211, 11 (LW 13, 65); *Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers* (1532) WA 30 III, 525, 10 (LW 40, 391-392). In *The Large Catechism* (1529) Pt. 1, 158, 161, Luther speaks of the honor laity owe clergy.

²³*On the Councils and the Church* (1530) WA 50, 632-633, 35ff. (LW 41, 154). This view is reflected in the *Apology*, XIII.II.

²⁴This view of development in Luther's thought on this topic has been advanced by L. Green, "Change in Luther's Doctrine of the Ministry," 174, 178-79.

opting for the divine institution of the office as early as 1520 in his *Treatise to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*.²⁵ By the same token the dominance of this second view of the ordained ministry in his later period does not represent a repudiation of the priesthood of all believers. Luther continued to speak of the authority of the ordained ministry as grounded in the universal priesthood as late as 1539.²⁶ The evidence simply does not warrant the conclusion that the emergence of this second view of the ordained ministry as instituted by Christ is merely the product of a development in Luther's thought. Its dominance in the later stages of Luther's life seems to be related to the different pastoral concerns which dominated in this period. His new emphasis seems to be connected with the turmoil in Wittenberg (1521) which ensued as a result

of the Reformation, the Peasants' Revolt (1524-1526), and the horrible condition of the local parishes which the Saxon Visitation (1527-1528) revealed. In short, Luther articulated his view of the ministry as divinely instituted in situations when it became apparent that the common life of the church was not proceeding smoothly. The idea of the universal priesthood carried to extremes was not maintaining the office of ministry or keeping the church's order. In response Luther began to speak of the ministry's authority as an office distinct from the universal priesthood. There is a consistent pattern in Luther's remarks about the divine institution of the office. Even in those instances earlier in his career where he spoke of the ministry's authority from above, he made his remarks in response to a concern for keeping order in the church.²⁷

This notion that the authority of the ordained ministry is directly instituted by Christ probably does not represent a contradiction of the first view. (At no point, after all, did Luther opt for subordinating clergy to laity.²⁸) Nor is it the case, contrary to several scholars, that the universal priesthood is a subordinate strand in Luther's thought because it has less sufficient biblical basis.²⁹ It is true that the divine institution of the office is perhaps more readily apparent in Scripture (cf. Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20; Phil. 2:12; Rev. 21:14). Yet there are New Testament evidences of the minister's authority being derived from below. Acts 6:3 witnesses to the appointment of the Seven by the church. Furthermore, 1 Timothy 3:10 and Titus 1:7 seem to indicate the Christian congregation's role in evaluating the fitness of a candidate for ministry.

The fact that Luther acknowledged these texts in formulating his view of the ministry's authority as derived from the universal priesthood clearly indicates that for him it was not just a subordinate strand or a polemical tool for addressing his specific circumstances. Rather this view and the understanding of the divine

²⁵*Treatise to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520) WA 6, 441, 22 (LW 44, 176); cf. *Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter* (1523) WA 12, 387, 1ff. (LW 30, 132-133).

²⁶*Commentary on Psalm 110* (1539) WA 41, 204ff., 3ff. (LW 13, 329-334).

²⁷Note the concerns addressed by Luther in the texts cited in footnote 25 above. My characterization of the context for Luther's second strand in his view of the ministry is also supported by L. Green, "Change in Luther's Doctrine of the Ministry," 178-79.

²⁸Robert H. Fischer, "Another Look at Luther's Doctrine of the Ministry," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (1966) 268-269, has argued that the two views of the ministry belong together in Luther insofar as God establishes the ministry through the call of the universal priesthood.

²⁹B. Gerrish, "Priesthood and Ministry," 416, 409, has opted for a subordination of the universal priesthood strand by Luther. For an argument on behalf of the dominance of the divine institution strand in Scripture, cf. Arland J. Hultgren, "Forms of Ministry in the New Testament —and Reflections Thereon," *dialog* 18 (1979) 209.

institution of ministry seem to have legitimacy in their own right. And Luther as a truly biblical theologian embraced both strands. The fact that they appear independently of each other in his thought is simply the result of his emphasizing certain dimensions of the ordained ministry in different contexts. In this regard he also follows the biblical witness.

We have observed a pattern in Luther's emphasizing of different strands in different situations. The pattern is characteristic of his entire career. As we noted earlier, his emphasis on the universal priesthood and understanding of the ministry as an office derived from it emerged in face of incipient clericalism. Yet when the issue was to describe the common/daily life of the church, or to address the chaos which might disorder it, then Luther stressed the other dimension

of ordained ministry, its divine institution. My thesis about the “pastoral” character of Luther’s theology—his tendency to speak of every doctrine in a variety of ways, depending upon the context he addressed—certainly seems substantiated by this analysis of his concept of the ministry. Let us conclude this essay with some reflections on the implications of this analysis for doing ministry today.

IV

We have already noted the implications for pastoral style of the view of ministry as derived from the universal priesthood. It implies a leadership style where pastors represent the congregation, facilitate its ministry, and see themselves principally as one of the congregation. The second view of the ministry as directly instituted by Christ implies a different leadership style. This view provides a framework for pastors to function as leaders and agents of change in the congregation, with a certain distance between themselves and the laity.

Thus Luther’s concept of the ordained ministry implies two different styles of ministry, each related to different pastoral concerns. There is something very true about Luther’s insights in regard to the tension between the two strands of the ministry, and the tension between the two styles of ministry they imply. Pastors find themselves caught in a tension between both these models of leadership style. They are placed over against the congregation in the minds of many of the laity. This study of Luther has indicated that to some extent this is valid, both biblically and theologically. Contemporary pastors need not feel uneasy about this dynamic. Yet at the same time we learn from Luther that pastors must take the universal priesthood seriously and work at identifying with the laity and sharing leadership with them.

It is a serious mistake, Luther implicitly tells us, to opt for one of these leadership styles to the exclusion of the other. There is a passage in his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* which shows that Luther recognized the need to employ both of these styles:

The second thing is that he opens his mouth. As I have said this is also part of a preacher’s duty. He should not keep his mouth shut, nor perform his office publicly merely so that everyone must keep quiet and let him take his place as one who has a divine right and command. But...he should speak out candidly without regarding or sparing anyone, let it strike whomever or whatever it will.³⁰

³⁰*Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* (1532) WA 32, 304, 5 (LW 21, 9).

Note that Luther sees a place for the pastor’s not standing over against the laity, not acting as one who has a divine right. Yet he seems to reject the idea that the pastor merely functions as a facilitator. Rather he envisions instances where it is necessary to stand over against a congregation to proclaim the prophetic word and let the chips fall where they may.

V

At the outset of this essay it was proposed that Luther not only provides theological justification for the two styles of leadership about which we have spoken, but that guidance can be derived from his insights for when it is best to exercise unilateral authority, and when it is best to function as a facilitator. We are far wiser in this regard to draw upon the wisdom of the past

for informing our ministry than simply relying on trends and feelings about what style will work best. Luther provides us with helpful guidance in matters of leadership style. He employed the notion of the minister's authority as derived from Christ when seeking to order the church's ordinary, daily life, when a word of prophetic judgment or guidance was necessary. In fact, this is what most people's expectations are of the clergy—that clergy stand over against the congregation and assume an active leadership style. The pastor is there to lead. That is a given, an expectation of laity. This is how Luther described the ministry when considering or regulating the daily life of the church. My suggestion is that we should practice the ministry in this way for these purposes.

Yet at the same time, when clericalism reared its ugly head, then the universal priesthood was stressed. Likewise for us today when we encounter hints of clericalism or find it necessary to encourage ourselves and others to assume full responsibility as Christians, that is the time to use this as a model for ministry and work hard at the role of facilitator. (We have previously noted that Luther's use of this model of authority—derived from the universal priesthood—correlates with a concern to defend the doctrine of justification from medieval legalistic abuses. The insights of this model should also be combined with the divine institution view when addressing a legalistic mentality. When pastors function prophetically in condemning sin, it is well to remember that as part of the universal priesthood they also condemn themselves.)

Luther's view is that pastors must live in a creative tension between standing over against the congregation at some points, and being one of the group in other ways. Which leadership style should one emphasize, and when? We can learn lessons from Luther: Against clericalism and so in order to encourage the full participation of all Christians in the church's ministry, the universal priesthood should be emphasized, and pastors must work at being part of their congregations, albeit as facilitators. But for regulating the ordinary daily life of the church, pastors may accept the authority they have, recognize that they have been set apart, and do so in good conscience and with ease. Contemporary ministry/theology demands a variety of styles, each for the appropriate circumstance. We seem to have Luther's (and the New Testament's) word on it.