



## A Lutheran Understanding of Pastoral Ministry: Implications for Pastors and Congregations

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What do Lutherans think about the church's public ministry and what difference does it make? We will look first at what the Lutheran heritage teaches about pastoral ministry and then ask, So what?—"So what for pastors?" and then, "So what for congregations?"

### I

Why does the church have pastors? Why does it need a public or official ministry? Is it simply because all groups need leaders? Teams need coaches; countries need presidents; businesses need managers; cub scouts need den mothers; tribes need chiefs; and so the church needs pastors? We sometimes think like that, especially in the United States, where we are used to inventing new structures for each new situation. Just as any organization needs someone to provide leadership or carry out its tasks, so too the church needs pastors and other public leaders.

But that is *not* the way the Lutheran tradition has understood it. Nor has it simply accepted the fact that from the very beginning the Christian church has usually had an official ministry. Many things were thrown out at the time of the Lutheran reformation in the sixteenth century, but the office of ministry was kept. Why? Because of theology: because of the way Lutherans understand God and salvation and faith.

I like to talk about the "logic of the Lutheran Confessions" on this matter. Consider the Augsburg Confession of 1530, the most important statement concern-

ing the Lutheran movement to reform the one church: after the first three articles on the triune God, humans and sin, and the saving work of Christ, article 4, the chief article, speaks of people being saved (or "justified," i.e., made righteous) "by grace through faith on account of Christ." This article is understood to be the center around which everything else revolves: that God saves us by grace alone through faith alone and not by requiring that we first achieve a certain level of righteousness. Then article 5 goes on to say how such saving faith is obtained; article 6 shows how such faith will set us free to do good works; and articles 7-8 discuss the nature and unity of the church.

Where is public ministry in all this? The Augsburg Confession does not wait until it gets to the church to speak of ministry. Rather, it does so in the very first sentence following the central article:

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of ministry, that is, provided the

Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Why is ministry placed here? For *theological* reasons; for reasons related to the way God has chosen to save us. God graciously saves us by faith; faith comes by hearing (Romans 10); this requires an external word, a word spoken to us, a word from someone else declaring God's verdict that we are pardoned, forgiven, and thus righteous—and such a word requires some “means” through which God may act. Thus these means of grace, the “spoken word” and the “visible word” (sacraments) require or necessitate the office (or role or function) of the public ministry. In other words Lutherans believe that the church needs ministers not merely for practical reasons (i.e., because organizations need leaders) but for theological reasons: God needs proclaimers of the word so that faith can be created in us.

Now all Christians are to speak the word, to bear witness to the faith; we all have a ministry, we are all members of the priesthood of believers. That is also a good reformation insight. But that did not mean the official ministry was not necessary; rather, it shaped the way the reformers talked about that ministry. Since all of us are not only saints but also sinners, and since we need to take care to see to it that the word is preached in its purity—i.e., with no strings attached—and so that people know where to hear it, the reformers added (in article 14) that “nobody should publicly (officially) teach or preach or administer the sacraments without a regular call.” The point of this is so that everyone can point to an “office,” a role, a place, where people can hear the gospel for sure, where there is a public office which the church guards and protects and fills, and where there is an office holder who has been trained, examined, certified, and installed who is accountable to God through the church to fill that office. In other words, the pastor is not simply self-chosen, not someone who has simply thrust herself or himself forward and is

<sup>1</sup>Augsburg Confession 5, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. and tr. T. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 31.

therefore not accountable to anyone. The point here is that the church will guarantee, insofar as possible from a human point of view, that the saving word of God will be truly proclaimed.

Notice that the Lutheran Confessions say that God “instituted” the office of ministry, God started it. That is important. It is not, as some later Protestants said, that we all are members of the priesthood of believers but for the sake of good order or convenience we have delegated our authority to one who is then the pastor. That would mean that *we* had created the church's ministry, but the Lutheran Confessions insist that *God* did it— by the way God has chosen to save us all through the “means of grace.”

Notice also that there is no claim that the pastor has any different status than other Christians or that the pastor is in some sort of higher order or class; before God all are equal. The reformers had had far too much negative experience with pastors and bishops with hierarchical spiritual authority and they certainly did not want to continue that sort of authority. Instead, they insisted that God institutes the office of ministry for one purpose only: to create and sustain faith through the working of the Holy Spirit in the gospel and the sacraments. And the church fills the

office in faithfulness to God's purposes.

## II

So what does this mean for pastors and other official ministers? Many things, but surely at least these.

1. The only *divine* authority involved in the public ministry is the authority of God's word, the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the promise of forgiveness of sins and eternal life. We pastors may accumulate all sorts of other "worldly" authority by our good looks, our skill at raising money, our compassion, our expertise of one sort or another, but these are not our true authority. We could build the largest, wealthiest, healthiest congregation in the world because of our great abilities, but if people never heard the gospel we would be total failures as pastors. And if we judge ourselves by all these other standards—which is a great temptation for any person in our culture—we will be misunderstanding what ministry is about. These other sorts of authority are not unimportant, of course, but they are not what is crucial, and they may even be dangerous (expertise may threaten to replace faithfulness, intelligence may replace exegesis, opinion may replace truth, the person of the pastor may replace the person of Christ).

In some other traditions the pastoral office is thought of in terms of actual power possessed by the pastor, but not in the Lutheran tradition. Lutherans hold that the power remains with God; with the apostle Paul they say, "I am not ashamed of the gospel; *it* is the power of God unto salvation" (Rom 1:16). Lutheran pastors are "servants of the word," in both senses: that it is the word that is their master (they are its servants), and that what they serve to people is the word and not something else.

In pointing out that the divine authority in ministry always remains with God, I do not mean to deny the importance of the other sorts of power and

authority that pastors have. To pretend that divine authority is the only authority a pastor has is to deceive ourselves. If power can be defined as the *ability* to do something (whether by virtue of strength, knowledge, skill, wealth, popularity, or whatever), we see that power is something which is earned or achieved by the possessor. On the other hand, if authority can be defined as the *right* to do something (whether by virtue of law, election, appointment, or birth, in the case of kings), we see that authority is something which is bestowed or granted. Kings of old were said to have both authority and power (like God!), while presidents and prime ministers have authority—which is distinguishable (if not entirely separable) from their power to get elected or to govern effectively. Lutheran pastors have no special power by divine gift other than power comparable to that of other humans by virtue of being creatures of God; and Lutheran pastors have very specific and limited divine authority as well as certain sorts of human or institutional authority.

The power we pastors have—to preach exceedingly well, or at being an expert counselor, or the influence born of long experience, or the ability to motivate parishioners to do good works or to share their wealth—is extremely important in enabling us to carry out our office. But we must not confuse this power with the divinely granted authority to proclaim the gospel of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name. Our power must be in the service of the authority of our office. If we get confused here and put the authority of our office in the service of our personal

and institutional power, we may be very successful but the gospel may not be served. Using power faithfully—always for the sake of the gospel—is at the heart of public ministry, especially so in these days when power has so often been abused. The old notion of the pastor as servant may still be a helpful guide in these matters. We are to follow the Master also in public ministry and he was among us as one who served. Emphasizing service is not in any way to downgrade leadership, however; it has been well said that “they also serve who lead.” Authentic pastoral leadership will be in those areas for which we have been given responsibility by God through the church and not in all sorts of other areas: call and ordination do not authorize one to pick the color of the tile in the church restrooms!

2. A second implication, related very closely to the first, is this: the pastoral office belongs to the whole church and not primarily to the office-holder. We who are called to this office are called by God through the church; we must use all our abilities and energies to discharge its duties, but it is not *our* office. We are not independent entrepreneurs. If we do not fill the office faithfully and competently, the church needs to find someone else. (It should be added that I am not denying that it is important for a pastor to have entrepreneurial skills—to organize, manage, take risks to get things done. The point is that these skills must not be used for personal agendas or goals but for those of the office, which belongs to God and the church.)

3. A third “So what for pastors?” is this: the Lutheran way of thinking about the pastoral office makes *proclamation* primary. Because the purpose of the church’s ministry is that God may use it to create and sustain saving faith in people, its first

priority must be making the gospel known to people. This does not refer only to formal preaching, for it entails all forms of proclamation, from sermons to sacraments, to comforting the grieving, to teaching, to encouraging, to absolving, but it surely refers in a key way to the Sunday sermon.

Here the Lutheran Confessions offer two key criteria for every sermon, two tests for sermons before they are preached. And I must confess that these two questions have ruined more of my sermons than I care to tell you about, and forced me back to the drawing board after I had thought I was done. The first test is: “Did Christ have to die on the cross for this sermon to be preached?” If not, it’s not the gospel; if not, it should not be preached; if not, while it may be clever or even true, it is not a saving word through which God can create faith in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. And the second test is this: “Is this sermon true comfort for real sinners?” Does it offer people something profound enough and radical enough to deal with death and judgment and the other ultimate sorts of things that faith is about?<sup>2</sup>

The great theologian Karl Barth was getting at this same sort of thing when he warned the preacher that the biblical text must become the word of God for *you* before you can preach it as God’s word to someone else. If we preachers are servants of the word, we are not free when it comes to proclamation. We must study the word of Scripture until it speaks to us as God’s word. Woe unto me if I do not preach the gospel. And woe unto me also if I don’t point out the whole counsel of God, so that people see that the gospel of the forgiveness of sins brings not only eternal life but also repentance and newness of life now, good works of love and justice. Faith without works isn’t faith.

4. Finally, pastors must be evangelists, those who bring the good news to people who

have not yet heard—or who in any case have not heard in a way that was believable. Many of us pastors do not like this implication. We like the cozy confines of our congregation and our fellow-members, we like the ordered structures of classes and worship services and Bible studies, but we find it difficult or unpleasant to speak about faith in Christ to unbelievers and strangers. But the gospel comes with a commission, to the whole church to be sure, but also therefore to its pastors, to bring the gospel to all nations. This also is the theological reason for cross-cultural ministry and for being an inclusive church. For Christian ministers, evangelizing all nations is a commission not an option. I am afraid many of us have been more than a little faint-hearted on this score. I think we need to pray for courage and creativity and, above all, for trust that God does indeed act through the word; because surely we can agree that all people need to hear it.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>These two tests are from the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, article 4, especially sections 5-47; cf. Tappert, 108-113.

<sup>3</sup>A great help here in both understanding evangelism and developing an intentional strategy is Patrick Keifert's recent book, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

### III

So what does the Lutheran view of pastoral ministry mean for congregations? Here are four implications.

1. Members of Lutheran congregations who understand the church's view of pastoral ministry will know that while the pastor is a servant, he or she is not primarily *their* servant; the pastor is above all the servant of the word. The pastor is called to tell us what God wants us to hear, not what our old sinful self may want to hear. The word of God may many times come not as something warm and comforting but as a challenge, as a demand for change, as an unwelcome reminder that we are to be good stewards because all that we have finally belongs not to us but to God. We call pastors and we pay pastors to give us the true word of God no matter what, in season and out of season, when it is welcome and when it is unwelcome, when it is comforting and reassuring and when it makes us mad. And since Lutheran Christians confess that each one of us remains still sinful even when we have been forgiven, we ought to know that often we will be most resistant to God's word of judgment. Or, knowing our sin so well, we will find God's gracious word of unconditional forgiveness almost impossible to believe. Then, thank God, the pastor will hold God's gracious promises before us so that we will have something to trust in despite ourselves.

2. Related to this first implication is a second "So what for congregations?" Since the pastoral office belongs to the church and not to the pastor, we all have a responsibility to see that it is carried out properly. We all need to know the pastor's true divinely-given task so we can hold the pastor accountable and (even more important) support the pastor in that proper work. As members of congregations we need to do everything possible to help the pastor so that he or she does preach the gospel and not something else and so that he or she does study the biblical word until it becomes God's word and can thus be preached also to us. Then, we ought to evaluate the pastor on relevant grounds rather than all sorts of other criteria that have nothing to do with the Lutheran view of pastoral ministry. How many of us pray regularly for our pastors? How many of us value the time pastors spend in study and continuing education? Or, on the other hand, how

many of us leave for the pastor a lot of matters that we might better be doing? The pastoral office belongs to the whole church; we need to take our share of responsibility for it and not simply leave it to the pastors.

3. *All* Christians are called to ministry. The pastor is not called to do the ministry for others but to help all to be Christ's servants, Christ's ministers. For example, the pastor is not to be the only preacher but (as has been well said) the "paradigmatic preacher," the one who shows all how to proclaim the gospel so that it is unconditional free grace and not something with strings attached. The pastor is not the only teacher but the one who teaches that all of us may know how to teach the faith to those around us. The pastor may not even be the best at many tasks of ministry, but we call someone to be our pastor to see to it that others from our midst who are competent will do particular aspects of ministry. In my judg-

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ment, the best pastors are "multipliers of ministry." They are those who are not preoccupied asking "How well am I doing?" but who rejoice that many are doing ministry well. But if we in the congregation do not understand this, our inclination will be to treat the pastor as the only minister. (It should be added here that pastors also need to understand this implication; and if they are truly to be multipliers of ministry their seminary training may need considerable revision.)

4. Finally, a Lutheran view of pastoral ministry, based on the idea that God brings people to saving faith through the spoken and visible word as that is communicated through the church, implies that *all* are called to be evangelists. All are called to tell the story. Many of us have access to persons whom pastors could never reach. We cannot leave evangelism to the pastor. Nor can we say, "This is our church and we like it just the way it is; we don't need more members." It is *not* our church; it is *Christ's* church and he does not like it just the way it is. Christ has more sheep to bring into his fold, more people to adopt as his sons and daughters, and many of them may be quite different from us. Christ's body needs all its members, not just a few of them. In our area there is a TV commercial for NAPA autoparts that ends with the words, "NAPA, because no part is unimportant." Evangelism, by all of us, because no potential member of the body is unimportant.

In conclusion, if we are going to be faithful to Christ as pastors and as congregations, it is essential that we see that the ministry is defined by the gospel of Jesus Christ and that we order that ministry accordingly. Then, if there is growth, it will be God's doing, and we may rejoice. And if there is more challenge and struggle than what we usually think of as "growth," we will still hang in there, because our faith will be in the God who was in Christ in that great struggle when life and death contended. That faith and not our own achievements or lack thereof is what true ministry is all about.