AUTHORIZATION FOR MINISTRY AND THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

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The Lutheran Confessions are witnesses, calling us away from themselves toward the aural and visible Word of God. They testify most clearly when put to use in their own element, pointing to the gospel, the breaking in of God's rule through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They are somewhat less useful when we try to uncover hints for proper Lutheran structuring of our life together as Christians. They are probably least useful when used as weapons to condemn those with whom we disagree on such matters.

On the specific question of authorization for ministry, the Lutheran Confessions do their best clarifying the overall purpose of ministry and helping us distinguish between the central matters of church and gospel and those "undifferentiated" practices (adiaphora) that make up so much of church life. They may also help us reclaim certain terms, especially "oversight" and "office," so that we may keep our Lutheran wits about us as we map out our approaches to these issues. However, to derive specific policy from our Confessions misuses these documents and betrays the faith to which they so clearly point. Instead, the Confessions must challenge us to think about our own situation anew as we develop policy to fit the age in which we live and work. We will examine each of these topics in turn.

The Goal of Ministry

As I described in my previous paper, the goal or "end" of the public office of ministry is the proclamation of the End in Christ. When baptizing, absolving sin, presiding at the celebration of the Lord's Supper, or preaching, the pastor publicly announces the death of the old and the birth of the new person in Christ. The Holy Spirit uses our broken words (and water and bread and wine) to be a down payment or guarantee (*arrabon* 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:14) of the new creation coming in Christ. In light of this eschatological urgency, when the authorized public minister is not present, any Christian may and, indeed, must deliver these goods, because the gospel demands a public voice.

At two levels, then, we are relieved of the temptation to make ministry a "work" by which we justify ourselves (that is, by which we save the church and us by our activity). First, if necessary, God will raise up children of Abraham from the stones (Luke 3:8) or cause the stones themselves to cry out (Luke 19:40). The public ministry is not actually something we can cook up by our own reason or effort. It belongs to God. Second, the gospel provides its own "authorization" (a word that means "creative power" in Latin). That is, when indeed someone announces new work in Christ so that faith (that is, the new life in Christ) comes to life, that is the only necessary "authorization." For the Word of God does what it says. This is the gist of article five of the Augsburg Confession (CA V), which states:

To obtain such [justifying] faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ's merit, when we so believe.²

The self-authenticating nature of the gospel and, hence, of the public ministry points out two dangers implicit in our deliberations. On the one hand stands the legalistic Scylla. We are always tempted to assume that we must add our own authority in order to make the public office of ministry work. Whether what we add is some ontological power (granted through apostolically successful bishops or Spirit-filled congregations) or some spiritual capability (a higher level of spirituality) or theological correctness (a greater degree of orthodoxy), the result automatically deflects our view away from Christ, the "author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2, KJV), toward ourselves and our work.

On the other hand we confront the antinomian Charybdis. In a desperate attempt to avoid legalism, we may imagine that are no scriptural or confessional grounds for ordering our common life at all and that any attempts to do so must be resisted at all costs. Thus, "anyone" can function as pastor. Usually, underneath such claims of Christian freedom lies the old creature's addiction to what Luther called "*Enthusiasmus*." About similar beliefs in his own day, Luther wrote in the Smalcald Articles, "This is all the old devil and old snake, who also turned Adam and Eve into enthusiasts and led them from the external Word of God to 'spirituality' and their own presumption."

Gospel and Adiaphora

Because Christ came into human flesh, the gospel, too, is always embodied in this world and involves real water, real bread and wine, real words, and real preachers. This world only functions properly when things are well ordered. For this we have rules and laws and organization. Thus, the gospel comes in certain fixed places and times (CA XXVIII.53-60) and with certain order (1 Corinthians 14:40). However, we dare not confused any particular order, time, or place with the gospel itself. Nor should we imagine that following a certain order wins us some special place before God (CA XV).

In whatever way we order the public ministry of the gospel, we can rest assured that the office of public ministry itself does not originate with us but with the gospel given by God. Thus, human beings in the church can authorize specific people to preach and teach the gospel, but we cannot vest the office of preaching and teaching the gospel itself with authority. That authorization comes only from God.

This distinction implies that the primary concern in authorizing persons for ministry must relate to practices "for the sake of good order in the church" (CA XXVIII.53). In this regard, we must examine each and every procedure or practice in the church with an eye to how they further or hinder the gospel, to which the public office of ministry bears witness. The office of oversight, to which bishops in particular have been called, demands such an accounting. (For a tentative list of important issues, see below.)

Reclaiming Oversight and Office for the Ministry

Oversight (*episkope*) is central to how we authorize people for service in the public of office of the ministry. Such oversight is ministry not monarchy. That is, it occurs in public service to the gospel itself. Thus, in describing episcopal authority, CA XXVIII.5 (German) states, "According to the gospel the power of ... the bishops is a power and command of God to preach the gospel, to forgive or retain sin, and to administer and distribute the sacraments." This power differs from that of other public servants of the gospel only in the number of people served, "either to many or to individuals, depending on one's calling."

In the ELCA, each bishop serves the baptized people of a particular synod. It is his or her God-given responsibility on behalf of the entire synod to oversee preaching, teaching and celebration of the sacraments for all in that particular synod. The measure of any policy regarding the public proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments must be the effectiveness of that policy in getting that very Word out. For example, treating people who serve poorer calls or smaller congregations or who have less formal training with less than the same respect afforded seminary-trained pastors may be disrespectful to that Word. Similarly, calling such people "lay pastors" or "lay ministers" imports into the *public* office of ministry the very late-medieval distinctions Luther sought to avoid and denies the legitimacy of very office such pastors fill: the public office of ministry. If Luther could argue that in an emergency Baptism a midwife acted with as much authority as St. Peter or Paul in the *public* office of ministry, then surely forbidding ordination or some similar public acknowledgment of such "lay ministers" in long-term ministry insults both them and the office they fill. At the same time and equally important is the training offered to such people. If they are merely warm bodies to fill a pulpit or self-appointed lay leaders from a congregation with less than adequate training and supervision, then the gospel itself takes a hit. A poorly trained seminary graduate or an untrained "lay minister" put consciences, which need to hear the gospel, at risk. (One could say the same thing about long-term pastors who neglect their calling, follow after any one of a number of siren voices that would seduce them from the ministry of the gospel, or simply go to seed. These, too, are part of the bishop's call.)

The word "office," too, has suffered in the last hundred years, to the point that the word, which originally meant "duty" in Latin, now has come to designate a room in English. The one clear exception to this denigration of the term comes in the phrase "office of the President." In the days of the scandal in the Clinton White House, pundits were mystified by the general abhorrence of President Clinton's behavior while he still enjoyed high approval ratings. In that crisis, the American people seemed able to distinguish the office from the officeholder. The church, too, can still boldly speak of the "office of bishop" and the "office of pastor" or, more generally, the "public office of ministry." The more closely we link this office and its authority to the Word of God and, hence, separate the office and its authority from the officeholder, the more we will serve that gospel and its public office. The public office of ministry is a calling in the church. It is as much a calling from God as being parent or child, spouse, employer or employee, citizen or magistrate. To be sure, all Christians are called in baptism, but not all are called to this specific office in the church.

What needs clarification is the nature and function of that office. People are indeed confused about what public ministers should do. Here, Luther's "Household Chart of Some Bible Passages" (formerly called the Table of Duties) provides a good example. Although he focused on the offices within the sixteenth-century German household (husband/wife, parent/child, employer/employee, etc.), he also included Bible passages for his readers describing the office of "bishop, pastor and preacher" and the office of magistrate. Today, pastors and bishops may wish to use opportunities such as stewardship campaigns, synod assemblies, and annual meetings not just to talk about programs and finances but to describe plainly what a public servant of the gospel actually does. Then, when a small or struggling congregation approaches the synod asking for pastoral ministry, they can learn even more fully what the office entails and how one may be authorized to fill that office.

Asking Ourselves Some Hard Questions

To help focus the development of good practices in authorizing people for the public office of ministry, here are some of the pertinent issues.

- 1. The Lutheran church arose in a university among trained theologians. There has never been a time (until now, perhaps) when seminary education was not highly valued by Lutheran leaders and congregants. From the time of the Reformation (around 1525) to the end of the sixteenth century, the percentage of university-trained Lutheran pastors in German parishes went from around ten percent to ninety percent. Similarly, in this country the need for educated clergy sparked many Lutheran denominations in the nineteenth century to found schools, colleges and seminaries. To what extent does the issue of authorization for "lay ministers" undermine the commitment to educated pastors (by seminaries or even in TEEM ministry)? To what extent is this merely a symptom for a shift in concern for mission in the church? How do salary differentials and the need for benefits also feed the problem? How do we as a church reject the anti-intellectual bent among so many Christian movements in our day while at the same time providing enough well trained clergy throughout the church?
- 2. The Lutheran Church also began when in 1527 one layperson, Elector John of Saxony, decided, after consultation with his counselors and theologians, to conduct a formal visitation of congregations in his territories, to determine their financial, administrative, and theological health. This defied those bishops in league with Rome who opposed the proclamation of the gospel, and it led directly to the 1530 Diet of Augsburg and the Augsburg Confession. It also set a precedent, still observed in some European Lutheran churches, for regular episcopal visitation of all congregations. To what extent has this necessary office of oversight in the gospel suffered degradation in our church? How might we overcome certain cultural biases (especially the American addiction to independence) and historical traditions (reinforced by certain forms of individualistic piety) in order, helped by some form of evangelical visitation, to reorient the life of our synods and congregations around the gospel? What might oversight and authorization look like in cases where specially authorized persons may serve in some of the most fragile parishes?

- 3. The Ninety-Five Theses arose from the pastoral concern of one assistant pastor and teacher in Wittenberg, Martin Luther, and from his growing realization that pastors and bishops were not properly fulfilling their office. His agitation against Rome was not a matter of personal pique or theological scholasticism. He was a pastor concerned that the gospel reach his "poor Germans," as he sometimes called them. Our deliberations over authorizing people for the public office of ministry must revolve around that Word of God in the eschatological crisis that now swirls around us. How would our refusal to ordain people who are actually functioning as pastors over the long term in congregations affect the office we serve? How would our too hasty ordination of poorly prepared people undermine that same gospel? Why has our nation suffered a decrease (I believe 10% in a decade according to a recent poll) in the number of people who even identify themselves as Christian? Why do half the Lutherans interviewed identify the "gospel" with salvation by works? To what extent might Melanchthon's attack on the bishops of his day apply *mutatis mutandis* to ours? "Let the bishops [or pastors or teachers] ask themselves how they will give an answer to God for breaking up the church."
- **4.** Whether our culture acknowledges the offices we hold or not, God certainly has set us in them to proclaim the coming rule of Christ through the forgiveness of sin. In the end, while we "sleep or drink beer with Philip [Melanchthon] and [Nicholas] von Amsdorff," God will bring in a rich and abundant harvest. How can this hope inform our conversation and practice?

Endnotes

- 1. See Gerhard O. Forde, "Authority in the Church: The Lutheran Reformation," in: A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism, edited by Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 53-67.
- **2.** CA V.1-3 (German), in: *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 40 [henceforth: BC 2000: 40].
- 3. This word was first coined to describe a heresy of the ancient church, in which certain monks claimed in their spiritual ecstasy to have outgrown the need for the means of grace. They took direction from the God within (en-theou; hence: en-thusiasm). Luther often used this term or the German Schwärmerei (raving related to the English swarm).
- 4. Smalcald Articles III.8.5, in: BC 2000: 322.
- 5. CA XXVIII.8 (Latin), in BC 2000: 93.
- **6.** See the Small Catechism, Household Chart, 2 and 4, in: *BC* 2000: 365.
- 7. For a particularly poignant description of this office, see *Luther's Works* (American Edition), edited by Jaraslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955-1986), 13: 52-53 (henceforth *LW* 13: 52-53). Luther's exposition of Psalm 82:2 reads in part: "To support or protect a poor, pious pastor is an act that makes no show and looks like a small thing. But to build a marble church ... that makes a show that glitters! That is a virtue worthy of a king or prince! Well, let it make its show! Let it glitter! Meanwhile my pastor, who does not glitter is practicing the virtue that increases God's kingdom, fills heaven with saints, plunders hell, robs the devil, wards off death, represses sin, instructs and comforts every [person] in the world according to his [or her] station in life, preserves peace and unity, raises fine young folk, and plants all kinds of virtue in the people. In a word, he is making a new world!"
- **8.** For some of the ideas in this section, see Gordon Lathrop and Timothy J. Wengert, *Christian Assembly: The Marks of the Church in a Pluralistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).
- 9. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XIV.2, in: BC 2000: 222.
- **10.** *LW* 51: 77.