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CATHOLICITY IN THE LUTHERAN MINISTRY

Helmut T. Lehmann

Historically, the Lutheran ministry has always been seen as participating in the catholicity of the church and its faith. This view is rooted in a profound way in the historic Lutheran Confessions. The opening sentence of Article I of the Augsburg Confession links its statement of faith with the Nicene Creed.¹ The link with the church catholic is further demonstrated in a concrete way in the Book of Concord through giving first and pride of place to the so-called ecumenical creeds of the Christian church — the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds. Consequently, the Lutheran ministry needs to be seen as standing in the context of the catholicity of the church's faith.

EMPHASIS ON MESSAGE

Because of this context the Lutheran ministry time and again has attempted to avoid appearing to be schismatic or disruptive of the true unity of the Christian church. The Lutheran ministry has sought to stress its participation in the catholicity of the Christian faith by throwing the searchlight of attention not on the office but on the message of that office. It is the message of the office which is important; the office derives its importance from the message. It is the reversal of this relationship between office and message which has wrought such havoc in the history and practice of ministry.

The message, central to the office of the ministry, can and should be variously

1. We unanimously hold and teach, in accordance with the decree of the Council of Nicaea . . ." (German version); "Our churches teach with great unanimity that the decree of the Council of Nicaea . . ." (Latin version), *Book of Concord*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed. and trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 27.

described if a reductionist view of message and ministry is to be avoided. The message is in the ministry of word and sacraments. The message is the proclamation of the Gospel. The message is the Word of God, the doctrine of justification.

The Lutheran Confessions see the quintessence of that message in the doctrine of justification. But they see this quintessence in the doctrine, not in its doctrinilization; doctrinilizing the message of justification only leads to its petrification and ossification. By contrast, behind and in Melancthon's formulation of the doctrine of justification in the Augsburg Confession is an existential question every person confronts, regardless of whether that person is conscious of the question or not. That question is, "How can I face God?" Or, to put the question another way, "What is God's attitude toward me?" It is a question, the existential seriousness and radicality of which comes home to us in the face of death. In the words of Elert, "The melody of death is so frightful because death strikes 'such a noble creature.'"² The encounter with God in the face of death, which places a question mark at the beginning and end of our life, is thus called by Elert, the "primal experience" (*Urerlebnis*).

Looming over our lives like the sword of Democles, death lifts the concern for justification out of the limbo of doctrinilization into the arena of the struggle between life and death, hope and hopelessness, freedom and slavery, innocence and guilt. The most liberating message a person can hear — with the outer and inner ear! — is the message, ". . . we cannot be justified before God by our own strength, merits or what we do, but we are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith when we believe we ourselves are received into favor and our sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God reckons as our righteousness in his sight (Rom. 3,4)."³ Christ's death deals a mortal blow to the question mark of death which hangs heavily over our heads!

It is this existential message of justification which is the non-reductionist quintessence of the Gospel, the uniquely singular proclamation of the Lutheran minister. The Augsburg Confession asserts that this message of God declaring godly for Christ's sake the godless, the atheists, the wicked, the impious, the ungodly — this message which is both a stumbling block and a rock of salvation — this message constitutes the heart of the church and its ministry. The position of the confessors is made clear in a formal way through the sequence in which the article on the office of the ministry⁴ is placed in the Augsburg Confession; Article V on the office of the ministry follows Article IV which deals with justification. The sequence is not accidental. It is intentional.

Evidence for this intentionality is found in the content of Article V which deals with the ministry. In the German version the opening sentence of this article reads, "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments." Similarly the Latin version reads, "In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sac-

2. Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 19.

3. *Book of Concord*, p. 30.

4. *Ibid.* p. 30 n. 4: "This title would be misleading if it were not observed (as the text of the article makes clear) that the Reformers thought of 'the office of the ministry in other than clerical terms.'"

raments was instituted.” Clearly, the antecedent for “such faith” (German version) or “this faith” (Latin version) is the justifying faith described in the preceding Article IV.

HOW CENTRAL IS JUSTIFICATION?

Our answer to the question whether the Lutheran ministry participates in the catholicity of the Christian church is dependent on a further question, namely, whether the doctrine of justification by faith is as central for the Christian church and its ministry as those who subscribe to the Augsburg Confession — and that includes all Lutheran pastors — claim it is.

The catholicity of the doctrine of justification was called into question at the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Helsinki in 1963 from a number of points of view. Roman ecumenists at Helsinki had mixed reactions to the debate among Lutherans concerning the meaning of the doctrine of justification for today. Some may have felt the theological discussions were being carried on by old line, conservative theologians. Translated into the terms of our interest that reaction could probably mean that the Lutherans were essentially hanging on to the sixteenth century point of view; the Lutheran emphasis and understanding of justification would therefore appear to be a roadblock to ecumenicity and unity. Some at Helsinki may have been glad to see an awareness on the part of Lutheran theologians of the weaknesses in the Lutheran doctrine of justification.

Some of the weaknesses referred to deserve our attention.

There were some Lutherans who pointed to the inadequacy of the doctrine of justification’s relationship to baptism and the new life. Other Lutherans had difficulty with the apparent bifurcation occasioned by Luther’s stress on *simul justus et peccator*. Some Lutheran New Testament scholars thought the traditional doctrine of justification did not sufficiently take into account the eschatological dimensions of this doctrine. Still others felt a lack consisting of not relating the doctrine of justification to life in the church. Over against an individualistic emphasis some pointed to the need for stressing the corporate nature of justification and the new life in Christ.

Among New Testament scholars Krister Stendahl has publicly expressed his unhappiness with the traditional emphasis on justification as the theme of the Letter to the Romans. In a “Foreword” he wrote to Johannes Munck’s *Christ and Israel*, Stendahl says of the famous chapter nine to eleven in Romans, “Nor is Romans 9-11 an appendix to a famous tractate on justification by faith. The statements about the famous righteousness of God and the presentation in Romans 9-11 are both subservient to Paul’s primary concern of stating the principles behind his travels and mission.”⁵ As Ernst Kasemann points out, Stendahl sees Paul’s message centered in “a concept of revelation based on salvation history.”⁶

In opposition to Stendahl, Kasemann says, “The doctrine of justification domin-

5. Johannes Munck, *Christ and Israel: An Interpretation of Romans 9-11*, trans. Ingeborg Nixon (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. VIII.

6. Ernst Kasemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 60.

ates Romans 9-11 no less than the rest of the epistle.”⁷ As a representative of the so-called post-Bultmann school, Kasemann cannot be lumped with the old line, conservative Lutheran theologians. In taking this position he is supported by another representative of the so-called post-Bultmann school, Gunther Bornkamm. Concerning the point at issue here Bornkamm says in his book on *Paul*, “In chapters 1-8 he (Paul) expounds his teaching on justification. Now (chaps. 9-11) he relates it (justification) to Israel’s history and at the same time tries to explain the paradox of his gospel — first to the Gentiles and then back again to the people originally chosen.”⁸

A CONCLUSION TO THE DEBATE

In the light of the criticisms of the doctrine of justification which were made by its proponents and opponents alike at Helsinki and since then, it may be important at this juncture to formulate a conclusion in a preliminary way. The formulation of this conclusion takes as its point of departure the understanding of the ministry set forth in the Augsburg Confession. It is the position of the Augsburg Confession that, by linking the office of the ministry to the doctrine of justification, the Lutheran ministry is placed completely in the tradition of the catholicity of the Christian faith. As was pointed out earlier, in the view of those who signed the Augsburg Confession, the faith to which they gave expression in writing was in continuity with the so-called ecumenical creeds and thus shared in the catholicity of the Christian faith and the Christian church.

Having stated this preliminary conclusion, it is important to update the points at issue at Helsinki. The most important and comprehensive recent book dealing with the ministry is written by Bernard Cooke, a Roman Catholic theologian. The title of the book is *Ministry to Word and Sacraments: History and Theology*.⁹ It deals mainly and comprehensively with the history and theology of ministry in the Roman, Lutheran and Reformed communions.

The significance of the book for this discussion can perhaps best be put in the form of a question: What role does the doctrine of justification play in relation to a Lutheran understanding of the ministry? Since the author of this book is extraordinarily well informed on his subject and did his research and writing for this book during a period of well over a decade (roughly from 1963-1973), the answer to our question is somewhat surprising: relatively little.

In reviewing the history and theology of the Lutheran ministry Cooke describes the difference between it and the Roman view in terms of two lines of divergence. The first line of divergence is expressed in the emphasis sixteenth century Lutherans placed on the Word of God as preaching and in the sixteenth century Roman

7. *Ibid.* p. 75.

8. Gunther Bornkamm, *Paul*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 95.

9. Bernard Cooke, *Ministry to Word and Sacraments: History and Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

emphasis on the sacraments. He sees correctly that the office of the priest is related to the offering of the sacrifice of the mass, while the office of the Lutheran pastor is related to the preaching of the Word of God. In discussing this divergence Cooke quotes from the first canon of the decree in the Twenty-third Session of Trent, "If anyone should say that in the New Testament there is no visible or external priesthood; or that there is no power of consecrating and offering the true body and blood of the Lord and of remitting and retaining sins, but only the office and ministry of preaching the Gospel; or that those who do not preach are not priests; let him be anathema."

Commenting on this decree of Trent, Cooke says, "Explicitly this canon merely rejects the claim of exclusivity on the part of the ministry of the word. Yet, the earlier paragraph of the decree which parallels it (chap. 1, which begins, *Sacrificium et sacerdotium ita Dei ordinatione coniuncta sunt . . .*) clearly stresses the 'offering of sacrifice' rather than the ministry of the word."¹⁰

The second line of divergence is not brought into focus as clearly as the first. The second line of divergence, according to Cooke, in relation to ministry has to do with justification. Broadly stated, the Roman view of justification focuses on sanctifying grace. In other words, justification is viewed as a lifelong process moving toward the attainment of holiness. The Lutheran view of justification focuses on justifying grace. In other words, justification is viewed as a divine act of grace by means of which God accepts the sinner. Cooke rightly sees that faith plays a major role in this accepting act of God. He also rightly sees that there is a difference in understanding of grace operative in these divergent views concerning justification. But he does not say wherein this difference consists. There is only the comment concerning the decree of Trent which contains "a scholastic analysis of grace in terms of causes."¹¹ Implied in Trent's perception of the Christian life as a process moving toward holiness is the possibility of the Christian cooperating with the grace of God. Implied in Cooke's analysis of a Lutheran understanding of justification as acceptance by God is a view of grace solely responsible for the acceptance of the sinner.

Though one must give Cooke high praise for his penetrating insights into the history and theology of the Lutheran ministry, he fails to see the intimate connection between the Lutheran ministry and the doctrine of justification. He tends to see the Lutheran ministry in its relation to the Word of God in a merely formal sense. The Lutheran ministry seems to consist mainly in giving major attention to the activity or preaching, the oral proclamation of the word, as though preaching of the word were almost restricted to what goes on in the pulpit. Yet Cooke goes out of his way to show how the sixteenth century Reformation, contrary to widely held views, was not responsible to the degree that it was said to be, for giving preaching exclusive prominence. In a formal sense, one can agree with that historical reading of preaching. But in a material sense i.e. in terms of content, Lutheran preaching drew and still draws or should draw its life blood from the doctrine of justification.

In fairness to Cooke we have to say that he comes very close to seeing the significance of the material aspect of the Word of God, the content, as being the hall-

10. *Ibid.* p. 289.

11. *Ibid.* p. 292.

mark of the understanding of the Lutheran ministry when he says, “. . . the difference between Luther’s thought and that of the Middle Ages lies not in the discovery of faith’s importance (for that is assumed in medieval soteriology), nor in the emphasis on the word, but in his insight into the distinction (in the message of Scripture) between law and gospel, his realization that Christ as savior is the essential content of the Bible.”¹² A footnote to this portion of Cooke’s text credits Hermann Sasse and Gerhard Ebeling with providing him with this insight into the thought of Luther. This insight comes very close to seeing how determinative the doctrine of justification is for a Lutheran understanding of the ministry. In fact, the distinction between law and Gospel and the elaboration of the dialectical relation between the two is the hermeneutical key to making justification the heart of a Lutheran minister’s preaching, teaching, counseling and administration.

But perhaps there is an even more fundamental divergence between the Roman and the Lutheran view of ministry, a divergence to which Cooke does not explicitly refer. This divergence has to do with the presuppositions with which we do theology or with which we treat a particular theme in theology. The table of contents of Cooke’s book already reveals one of the basic presuppositions for his investigation of the history and theology of ministry, i.e., the doctrine of the church. The doctrine of the nature of the church sets the tone and the guidelines for the study of the history and theology of ministry. In adopting ecclesiology as his presupposition Cooke is faithful to the Roman tradition, for Roman ecclesiology clearly presupposes the priority of the church over the word. In part, it was over this question of priority that the Reformation fight was all about. Is the church or the word normative for what we believe, teach and confess? Of course, the alternatives are historically and theologically not that simple. Still, a choice has to be made between these alternatives in such a way that the tensions and distinctions are maintained in affirming the necessary relationship between church and word.

Even though Cooke does not seem to acknowledge the presuppositions for his study of the history and theology of ministry as forthrightly as might be desirable, something has to be said for the correctness of his approach to the subject. The study of the history and theology of the ministry is a sub-theme of ecclesiology. Historically and methodologically it is only correct and proper to deal with the nature of the church in treating the nature of the ministry. The two are intimately connected. Our view of the church reveals our view of the ministry. Cooke has a progressive view of the nature of the church. In his view the church is more sacramental than it is hierarchical. Because he has a sacramental view of the church he has a sacramental view of the ministry as distinguished from a sacramental-hierarchical-canonical view.

A major, though not exclusive, presupposition for doing theology in a Lutheran style is the Pauline doctrine of justification. And, as was pointed out in the beginning of this essay, the Augsburg Confession links the doctrine of the ministry formally and materially to the doctrine of justification. Therefore, the doctrine of justification is the major presupposition for the development of an understanding of the history and theology of ministry. The doctrine of justification with its dynamic thrust

12. *Ibid.* p. 291.

for faith, life, grace, freedom is the hermeneutical key for a scriptural understanding of the ministry.

This means, then, by which justification takes place is the word of God to which the Scriptures bear witness. As Melancthon puts it in his classic interpretation of justification in the *Apology of the Augsburg*, "Therefore justification takes place through the Word, as Paul says (Rom. 1:16), 'The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.' and (Rom. 10:17), 'Faith comes from what is heard.'" ¹³ At this point Melancthon assumes the intimate connection between the doctrine of justification and the ministry of the word. It is this dynamic connection between the doctrine of justification and the ministry of the word which prevents us from formulating the doctrine of the ministry in terminology which is always identical, consistent, fixed or clear.

Today we speak of "the ministry" and of "ministry." We hear of the ministry of word and sacrament and of ministry of the word. Sometimes "ministry of the Gospel" is shorthand for everything we mean by ministry of word and sacrament. These various ways of speaking of the ministry are more than a matter of *nomenclature*, though that, too, is a consideration; they are more because the means by which we are justified — the ministry of word and sacrament — are penultimate. Our relationship to God for time and eternity is the ultimate concern. Because that relationship is our ultimate concern the doctrine of justification injects into our reading of the history and theology of the Lutheran ministry a powerful eschatological note. The goal of a Lutheran understanding of the ministry has always been to point away from itself and beyond itself to him who is all in all, Jesus Christ. In the final analysis, the affirmation of the presence of catholicity in the Lutheran ministry remains an eschatological statement.

13. *Book of Concord*, p. 116.