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MINISTRY

IN THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

Perspective on Women's Ordination

Walter H. Freitag

The Lutheran Confessions have much to say about ordination, the office of the ministry, and the power and authority entrusted to this office. Luther and other reformers fought a war on two fronts against their Roman Catholic opponents: one against the tyranny of the papacy; the other against the monastic orders in the church. Many of the arguments employed in that struggle apply equally well to the subject of the ordination of women.

The Augsburg Confession, Article V, The Ministry of the Church, states: "In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted."¹ And in Article XIV, Ecclesiastical Order, we read: ". . . no one should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he is regularly called."

The fixed point of reference for ministry then is the Word of God which is to be preached. That is the norm against which questions regarding ministry are to be measured.

MEANING OF ORDINATION

The initial question is: What does ordination mean? Of what does it consist?

In the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, in the Article on the Number and Use of the Sacraments, the following points are made: 1) priesthood is not Levitical, where priests sacrifice for the people and merit the remission of

1. Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are quoted from Theodore G. Tappert, translator and editor, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

sins for others; Christ's sacrifice is itself sufficient for the sins of the whole world; 2) but if ordination is understood to apply to the ministry of the Word, it may be called a sacrament; indeed, even the imposition of hands could, from this perspective, be called a sacrament; 3) the church has the command to appoint ministers, because God approves such ministry and is present in such ministry.

Ordination then is the rite by which the church sets suitable candidates apart for the office of ministry -- ministry which is by divine command. Officials carrying out such a rite do not possess that power in their own right; they represent the whole church in the act of ordaining.

THE POWER OF THE KEYS

The second question concerns the power of the keys, namely, the authority to bind or to remit sins. This has to do with the jurisdiction of the office of the pastor.

A sharp definition of the jurisdiction of the pastoral office is put forward in the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII, Ecclesiastical Power, ". . . according to the Gospel, the power of the keys, or the power of bishops, is a power or commandment of God to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments." This power is exercised only by teaching or preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments, according to their calling, either to many or to individuals. For thereby are granted, "such eternal things as eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life."

It is exciting, in this connection, to follow the interpretation of the Lutheran theologians at Smalcald in 1537 in opposition to the view that the pope is the primary bishop because St. Peter was the first among the apostles. Their refutation is as follows:

1) Peter speaks as the representative of the entire assembly of the apostles, as the text of Matthew 16:18f itself makes clear. Further, the keys belong to the Church as many clear and firm arguments testify. "For Christ, speaking concerning the keys, Matt. 18:19, adds: If two or three of you shall agree on earth, etc. Therefore he grants the keys principally and immediately to the Church, just as also for this reason the Church has principally the right of calling." Moreover, the keys are nothing else than the office whereby this promise is communicated to every one who desires it, just as it is actually manifest that the church has the power to ordain ministers of the church." The church is not built upon Peter, but upon the Word which was the faith and confession of Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Therefore, the person of the teacher adds nothing to this word and office of ministry.

2) Christ gave the apostles only spiritual power, to teach the Gospel, to announce the forgiveness of sins, to administer the sacraments, to excommunicate the godless without bodily force. He did not give them the power of the sword.

3) Even if the primacy of the Roman pontif were to be conceded, he should not be obeyed if he were to defend godless services, idolatry and doctrine

conflicting with the Gospel. Since that is what he has done, he bears the marks of the Antichrist.

The conclusion is clear. The power of the keys is not assigned exclusively to Peter, or to the pope, but to the church. It is a power which by divine right is common to all who preside over churches, whether they are called pastors, elders, or bishops. Indeed, it extends to the whole Church, including the laity.

THE CALL TO MINISTRY

The third area of interest is the matter of the call to ministry. Articles VII and VIII of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession have this to say on evil or wicked men in the ministry: "When the sacraments are administered by unworthy men, this does not rob them of their efficacy. For they do not represent their own persons but the person of Christ, because of the church's call, as Christ testifies, Luke 10:6, He that hears you, hears me. When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they do so in Christ's place and stead."

Another dimension is brought into view when we ask about the offices of ministry, and the power of the various grades in ministry. The treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope provides very detailed instruction on these matters. In it, the Lutheran reformers show that the pope, by divine right, is not superior to other bishops or pastors.

Eleven arguments are presented: 1) no apostle is to lord it over another (Luke 22:25); rather are the apostles to be equals in the common ministry of the Gospel; 2) apostles are not to be sovereigns, but like children who neither seek nor take sovereignty (Matt. 18:2); 3) on the basis of John 20:21, Christ sends forth his disciples without distinction, so that no one of them was to have more or less power than any other; 4) Saint Paul did not get his authority from Peter, but independently of him, and his ministry depends exclusively upon the Word of God; 5) 1 Cor. 3:6 shows that ministers are equal, and that the Church is above the ministers; 6) the increase in the authority of the Roman bishop began with decisions from the time of the Council of Nicea, that is, by human authority; 7) the same Council of Nicea agreed to election of bishops by their own churches and ordination, in the presence of bishops from neighbouring areas, but not under the superiority and domination of the Roman bishops; 8) many ancient synods were held without the Roman pope; 9) Jerome teaches that bishops are equal in dignity; 10) Gregory refuses to allow himself to be called universal bishop; 11) the Church has the power to decide the election, yet popes have been confirmed by emperors, how then are they popes by divine right? Consequently, distinctions and grades in ministry are due to human authority and

arrangement; but they are neither more meritorious nor necessary for justifying faith.

CELIBACY

The battlefield of the Reformation did not only stand over against the papacy. It also faced another enemy -- the institution of celibacy and monasticism. As a result, the Confessions lay down a barrage of articles against monastic vows, enforced celibacy and various and assorted abuses associated with the ascetic way of life.

Celibacy was defended on the ground, among others, that priests had to be pure, and cited the Levitical priesthood as proof. In reply, the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIII (XV) says: "The Gospel frees us from these Levitical impurities and regulations about impurity. If anybody supports the law of celibacy in order to burden consciences with these Levitical observances, we must definitely resist him as the apostles in Acts 15 resisted those who required circumcision and tried to impose the law of Moses on Christians."

SUMMARY AND APPLICATION

A number of critical assertions can now be made about the Lutheran view of the ministry.

In the first place, the Word of God is exalted in connection with ministry as the minister is humbled in relation to it. The ministry is Christocentric, not anthropocentric. Its authority, power, dignity, title, function, use and operation stems from Christ, depends upon him, and relies upon the work of the Holy Spirit. In this respect, the person of the minister is irrelevant and immaterial to the essence of ministry. He is not in himself the substance of ministry.

In the second place, the ministry is necessary for the Church by the command of God, so that the Gospel be preached and the sacraments administered. But the ministry in itself does not justify anyone, does not give grace, cannot forgive or declare absolution. Nor does the person occupying an office of ministry become worthy or virtuous because of it, nor impart such qualities meritoriously to that office. All these things can be done by Christ alone.

In the third place, ministry is not a matter of position, rank and official prerogative; on the contrary, it is a matter of the function to be performed and of the service to be given.² It is ministry when the Gospel is preached and the sacraments administered. The authority it is given is the spiritual authority lacking the weapons of force and coercion, of political, civic, or legal power. The norm of that authority is the Lord.

In the fourth place, ministry is subject to the church and not above it; but both Church and ministry are subject to the same norm -- the Gospel of Jesus

2. W. Pauck, "Luther and the Ministry" *The Springfielder*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (June, 1972), 3-11.

Christ. Therefore the Church has the right to call, elect and ordain pastors. Yet should it fail to do so, or abuse that right, God can and will raise up ministers to feed the sheep.

In the fifth place, ministers are not assigned a superior place of status in the Church. Pastors are not less sinful nor are pastors different from the laity in such things as marriage, customs and habits.

These affirmations all have a bearing upon the question of the admissibility of women into the office of the public ministry. The Word to be preached is not discriminatory; it does not speak only to men and not to women. Since the person of the pastor -- character, qualities, traits, sins, failings -- does not determine the office, nor give it merit or virtue or justification, the sex of the person also does not enter into the matter. Nor is the spiritual authority of the ministry confined to the male gender of the human community, precisely because the pastor is never given control over that authority. While the church has the right to call, elect and ordain pastors, that right is not exclusive and unrestricted; it is subject to the norm of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Moreover, if pastors are free with respect to marriage and celibacy, then they should also not be restricted as to candidacy on the basis of sexual gender. To prohibit candidates for the ministry on the ground of sexual differentiation is, in principle, no better than to ban them from it because they are married. It is not the function of ministry, or of ministers, to make a man out of a woman, or a woman out of a man or to make either sexually neuter.

Indeed, if the issue is to be forced upon the church, the rule to be followed is not the Law, whether of Moses or of human tradition and custom, but the doctrine of the Gospel. "Unto the pure, all things are pure." Every other route leads to the doctrine of devils, according to the confessions. It is another question whether or not such an action is prudent; whether it will make for good order; whether it will disturb tender consciences; or, whether the congregation will have the right to accept or reject it. Here, the issue hinges solely on the matter of admissibility of women to minister on the basis of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.