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To begin the story of the Lutheran Reformation at the traditional starting point is to begin in the middle. Luther's famous act of nailing up the Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg on the eve of All Saints in 1517 merely marks the culmination of a long spiritual journey on which he had been travelling at least since his appointment over six years before to the Chair of Theology in the University of Wittenberg.[1] In recognition of this process one of the main achievements of Lutheran scholarship in the past generation has been tracing the course of Luther's intellectual development during these formative years from its roots in medieval thought and practice. In no area is the medieval background more important than in interpreting Luther's (and indeed Lutheran) statements on ministry. Here we can go into no details of this background, but in all that follows two underlying principles must be borne in mind: First, all statements about ministry must be seen against the foil of the medieval understanding of ministry as a highly graded hierarchy with a clear distinction between laity and clergy.[2] Second, it must also be emphasized that the question of ministry was but a minor item on the agenda in the Lutheran controversy with Rome.[3]

In this paper we shall discuss the major themes in the early Lutheran understanding of ministry. We shall use as our sources Luther's own works and the *Augsburg Confession* of 1530, along with the various articles, treatises and commentaries that surround this historic document.[4]

I

The point of departure for any discussion of the Lutheran understanding of ministry quite naturally is to be found in the teaching of Martin Luther himself. The complexity of his

thought coupled with the apparently contradictory nature of many of his utterances on the subject demand, however, that we must seek to interpret them within the broader framework of his underlying theological principles.

The basis of Luther's new theology, and the spiritual crises which precipitated it, were grounded in his vision of the nature of humankind. Rooted deep in the Augustinian view of human nature this vision emphasized that human beings were completely unworthy to stand before God. As a result, the core of the Reformer's theology was constituted by his doctrine of *sola fide*, by faith alone. According to this doctrine no one can ever hope to be justified by virtue of one's own works, thus the aim of the sinner must be to achieve *fiducia*—a totally passive faith in the righteousness of God—and in the consequent possibility of being redeemed and justified by his merciful grace.[5]

This doctrine of justification by faith alone—Luther's so-called *fideism*—led the reformer to enumerate two main features of his concept of the church that have direct bearing on his doctrine of the ministry. He first of all—from a traditional point of view—devalued the church as a visible institution. If the attainment of *fiducia* constitutes the sole means by which the Christian can hope to be saved, no place is left for the orthodox idea of the church as an authority interposed and mediating between the individual and God. The true church becomes nothing more than an invisible *congregatio fidelium*, a congregation of the faithful, gathered together in God's name. This Luther saw as a sublimely simple concept, completely encapsulated in his claim that the Greek work *ecclesia*, which is habitually used in the New Testament to denote the primitive church, should be translated simply as *gemeine* or congregation.[6] Despite his assurance, however, that "a child of seven knows what the church is", this apparently simple doctrine was widely misunderstood, especially by those who took him to be saying that he wished "to build a church as Plato a city, which nowhere exists."[7] In his later theological writings he sought to counter these misconstructions by adding that while the church is a *communio*, it is also a *republica*, and as such needs to have a visible embodiment in the world. But while introducing this and other similar concessions, Luther continued to insist that the true church has no real existence except in the hearts of its faithful members. His central conviction, as

Bornkamm points out, was always that the church can simply be equated with *Gottes Volk*, "the people of God living from the word of God."[8]

The other distinctive feature of Luther's concept of the church was that. in stressing the idea of the church as nothing more than a congregation of the faithful, he also minimized the separate and sacramental character of the ministry that traditional catholicism had long maintained. The outcome of this was his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.[9] This concept and its social implications were worked out most fully in the famous *Address* of 1520. In it Luther argued that if the church was only *Gottes Volk* then it must be "a piece of deceit and hypocrisy" to claim that "pope, bishop, priests and monks are called to a spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called to a temporal estate". All such spurious distinctions should be abandoned, said Luther, and he insisted that "all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate" since they belong to it not by virtue of their role or rank in society, but simply in virtue of their equal capacity for faith which makes them all equally capable of being a spiritual and Christian people.[10] He deployed this argument partly as a way of claiming that all believers, and not just the priestly class, have an equal duty and capacity to help their brethren and assume responsibility for their spiritual welfare. But his main concern was clearly to reiterate his belief in the ability of every faithful individual soul to relate without an intermediary to God. The result was that throughout his ecclesiology, as in his theology as a whole, we are continually led back to the central figure of the individual Christian and his/her faith in God's enduring grace.

With this broad conceptual framework in mind it is now possible to look more closely at the specific references on the theme of ministry that occur both in Luther's writings and in the confessional and related literature of Lutheranism in the sixteenth century.

II

That there are two strands of thinking on the question of ministry in Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, has long been recognized by scholars. On the one hand there is the

emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, while on the other, there is the acknowledgement of some public office of ministry.[11] A variety of attempts has been made to deal with this tension. Lowell Green, for example, attempts to show that Luther's teaching on the ministry underwent three stages of development: the first, which lasted up to 1519, shows Luther in essential agreement with the traditional medieval approach; during the second, from 1520 to 1525, a great shift took place in the reformer's thought and, "in protest against the clerical priesthood of the papal system", he vigorously championed the idea of universal priesthood and the local congregation; in the final phase, which began after 1525, Luther began to place greater emphasis on the authority of ministry as an office that is different from the priesthood of all believers.[12] Fisher has taken issue with this approach, attractive as it is, on the grounds that there is no evidence that Luther ever contemplated abolishing the ordained ministry or that he ever envisaged the local congregation eclipsing the larger fellowship of the church.[13] This argument is persuasive and we lean towards the thesis of Brian Gerrish, that two lines of thought—universal priesthood and recognized ordained ministry—coexist in Luther in an irreducible tension, with the latter being the more prominent notion.[14] But whatever view one takes, one thing at least is certain: Luther left an ambiguous heritage on the question of ministry for those who followed him, and this ambiguity is reflected in the Confessions of Lutheranism and remains within the Lutheran tradition to this day.

In one respect, however, when Luther does talk of ordained ministry there is no ambiguity. For his ministry is always understood as ministry of the Word. This position set Luther—and indeed the entire Reformation tradition—in fundamental opposition to the understanding of ministry that had emerged in the medieval church; the following quotation by Edgar Carlson puts this point into perspective:

> ... in Rome the ministry (i.e. the hierarchy) presided over the word; in the Reformation view the word presided over the ministry. In Rome the word was an instrument through which the ministry functioned: in Luther the ministry was instrumental to the word....Therefore, the counterpart in Reformation theology to the hierarchy in Roman theology is not the ministry but the word.[15]

As Reumann recognizes, this formulation is somewhat crude, but it underlines the important point that Lutheranism tended "to discuss the ministry in light of the word, not to defend a divine order of ministers as central."[16]

This awareness of the dependence of the ministry upon the Word is well demonstrated in the *Augsburg Confession* in Article V on "The Office of the Ministry". This article follows immediately after the central article on justification. The German version reads:

> To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is provided the Gospel and the Sacraments.

In Latin:

> In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of the teaching of the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted.

A similar view of the dependence of ministry upon the Word is found in Melanchthon's *Iudicum de iure reformandi* (1525).

> On the other hand, when they say that they are the church and the church cannot err so that whoever falls away from them falls from the church, they are easily answered. For we will not allow that papacy and bishops, monks and priests are the church—although among them are people who, belonging to the churches, do not give consent to their errors, but have a right faith. So Paul teaches in Ephesians 5 that the church consists only of those in whom the Word is urged and promulgated—there is church and nowhere else.[17]

The view of the ministry seen here, then, is very different from the medieval Roman pattern against which Luther and the Lutherans were reacting. It is not the ministry that constitutes the church, it is the proclamation of the Word. The ministry is merely the tool that God uses in this proclamation.

The question that naturally presents itself at this juncture is why does the Lutheran Reformation insist on an office of the ministry at all when it is so adamant in its emphasis on the universal priesthood of all believers? The answer would seem to be twofold. In the first place, there is the purely practical ground that a special office of ministry is best able to keep good order in the church and prevent "a confused bawling such as... among frogs."[18] Thus, as the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* insists, even though "the spiritual office has been entrusted to all believers, its administration is not left to the whim of every individual believer."[19]

In the second place, however, it must be realized that despite the seeming tension between universal priesthood and

ordained ministry, and despite the subordination of ministry to the Word, ministry is to be traced back to a divine institution. In society there are "two realms" referred to as "spiritual government" and "civil government" both of which derive their dignity from the Word of God.[20] These two realms are clearly distinguished and it is emphasized that spiritual government is not merely "created and instituted" for good order, but is instituted by God's command and promise. Originally this is seen in the calling of the apostles, and thereafter through God's call in the church—"wherever God gives his gifts: apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers"—to set forth the gospel.[21]

But, even though, as in the Roman Church, Luther and his followers recognized the divine origin of the office of ministry, in contrast to Rome with its hierarchy of bishops, priests and deacons, Lutherans insisted that in principle the ministry be regarded as one office where all ministers are equal, without rank or grade. Thus it is common to find references to "bishops *or* priests"[22] and there is no hesitancy to declare "... the Pope has no more power in the use of the keys than every pastor...."[23] Luther sums this up well in his *Prayer of a Pastor* where he says "Lord God, Thou has made me a bishop and a pastor in the Church."[24] Yet while no essential or fundamental difference was allowed between the office bishop and presbyter, Lutherans were prepared to acknowledge that a functional distinction existed. This distinction could be drawn, however, only on the grounds that bishops exercised their authority on the basis of "human authority" and not by divine right.[25] We shall expand on this point later; it is sufficient to recognize here that Lutherans considered the ministry to be in principle a single office, and any distinction between the offices of bishop and presbyter was considered to be functional.

The picture that begins to emerge then, is that—despite a strong emphasis on universal priesthood—within the church there is, under the Word of God, an office of ordained ministry that is necessary in the life of the church for proclaiming the Word in its various forms. This "office of preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments" is viewed in the confessional literature as "spiritual government," in parallel with "civil government." Both realms derive their authority from the Word of God. But the two realms must be sharply distinguished: unlike civil government, which is created and instituted for good

order in society, spiritual government is instituted by God's command and promise, originally in the calling of the apostles and thereafter through God's call to the church. This office is generally regarded as "one office" where all are equal, without rank or grade and there is no fundamental distinction between the office of bishop and presbyter. The only distinction here is functional, and the priority of the bishop is based not on any innate quality, but solely on human authority. With these broad principles in mind it will be helpful to look at the circumstances, political and ecclesiastical, that helped shape them.

III

Among Luther's earliest attempts to deal directly with the problem of ministry is the tract *De instituendis ministris ecclesiae* of 1523 or 1524.[26] Addressed to the Utraquists of Bohemia, who were experiencing great difficulty having pastors ordained, Luther counselled that since papal bishops refused to ordain evangelicals, they should take matters into their own hands and ordain these men themselves. The process for these ordinations suggested by the reformer was for an assembly of clergy to select both ministers and bishops and to commend these candidates to the larger church for approval. The bishops, in turn, could choose from among themselves an archbishop to exercise appropriate oversight. Since the same situation would soon develop in Germany—ordained priests were dying while bishops would ordain only those intent on denying the gospel—in a number of sermons during 1524 Luther emphasized that similar revolutionary steps would soon be forced upon his followers.[27]

The *Unterricht der Visitatoren* of 1528, written by Melanchthon and to which Luther contributed a preface, comes close to the establishment of a new church order. The text assumes the establishment of the office of a superintendent whose duties are defined as overseeing pastors and congregations. The superintendent is also given the task of examining candidates for the ministry, testing them in regard to both doctrine and life to determine whether they would be capable of exercising proper leadership over their congregations. Whether the superintendent was also expected to perform ordinations is unclear from the document and scholars have different opinions on the matter. What is clear, however, is that we see the nucleus of a new

model of church government emerging: it is territorial in scope and differs from both the Roman pattern with its universal hierarchy, and from the purely congregational approach of the various Anabaptist groups.[28]

From these passages it becomes apparent that the initial impetus toward a new model of ecclesiastical organization arose out of Luther's perception of the failure of the traditional structures. This same concern is reflected in the confessional and related writings of early Lutheranism. One of the clearest expressions of this is found in Article XIV of Melanchthon's *Apology*:

> With the proviso that we employ canonical ordination, they accept Article XIV, where we say that no one should be allowed to administer the Word and the sacraments in the church unless he is duly called. On this matter we have given frequent testimony in the assembly to our deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they were created by human authority. We know that the Fathers had good and useful reasons for instituting ecclesiastical discipline in the manner described by the ancient canons. But the bishops either force our priests to forsake and condemn the sort of doctrine we have confessed, or else, in their unheard of cruelty, they kill the unfortunate and innocent men. This keeps our priests from acknowledging such bishops. Thus the cruelty of the bishops is the reason for the abolition of canonical government in some places, despite our earnest desire to keep it. Let them see to it how they will answer to God for disrupting the church.[29]

Often, Lutheran statements were somewhat less conciliatory in tone as the following passage from the *Torgau Articles* demonstrates:

> There can be no better means for unity in these matters, than for the bishops to discontinue the oath and obligation, whereby they bind those whom they ordain to godless doctrine and to a life without marriage; for thus they would remain in their dignity and government, and would obtain priests enough. But if they will not discontinue them, they must be utterly overthrown. For what is now taught and what is now arranged are of the same nature; and they will not burden themselves with such heathenish, dangerous and godless doctrine. And it will at last come to this, viz., that ordination will not be asked or received of bishops, but as is otherwise becoming.[30]

Whether conciliatory or militant in tone, passages like these clearly demonstrate the Lutheran willingness—and in

Melanchthon's case "deep" and "earnest" desire—to operate within a modified form of traditional ecclesiastical government. They further show that the Lutherans were driven from the orbit of catholic discipline by the rigid and uncompromizing attitude of the papal authorities. Before drawing any firm conclusions on the depth of the Lutheran commitment to canonical government, however, we must pause to look at the historical circumstances that helped shape the *Augsburg Confession*.

As Robert Goeser has pointed out, the interpretation of the *Augsburg Confession* and its related documents pose difficult hermeneutical questions and one must be careful not to take everything that is said at face value.[31] He argues persuasively that the *Confession* must be interpreted within its own historical milieu, and must not be viewed simply as a set of irenic theological statements. Accordingly, it must be recognized that the *Confession* was, in essence. a negotiating paper presented by Protestant princes and theologians to the emperor. The goal of the process—from a Protestant point of view—was to consolidate and exploit Protestant gains by winning imperial recognition of evangelical practises regarding the mass, communion in both kinds and priestly marriage. In return for concessions in these areas, the evangelicals were willing to recognize a limited form of episcopal authority. Just how limited this proposed authority would be is realized when we recall from our earlier discussion that the Lutherans recognized no fundamental distinction among "pastors, presbyters and bishops" since all are ministers of the Word.[32] As the framers of the document point out in another context "any distinction between the grades of bishop and presbyter (or pastor)" is "by human authority" and not "by divine right." In other words, the only difference between bishops and presbyters that the evangelicals recognized was functional.[33]

Yet even this limited form of episcopacy met serious resistance within the Protestant camp. From the very outset Philip of Hesse protested its restoration and as discussion continued a majority of the princes were drawn to his point of view. The major reason for the princes' stance was, of course, that they resented papal interference within their own areas and they did not believe that recognition of episcopal jurisdiction. however limited in principle, would serve to do anything but undermine the religious reforms that were taking shape in their

territories. How could they be expected, they argued, to recognize as shepherds those who have shed blood like wolves?[34] Theological grounds for this position could easily be provided by the argument that Scripture had given the princes a mandate to reform the church—because of past abuses—and abolish episcopal power.[35] They argued further that according to Scripture episcopal jurisdiction stems not from divine ordination but purely from human authority, and consequently could be ignored—indeed "utterly overthrown." By the end of the negotiations only Electoral Saxony, with Melanchthon as their theological champion, was prepared to acknowledge episcopal jurisdiction.[36] Seen in this light the apparently favourable attitude of the *Augsburg Confession* towards episcopacy must be carefully qualified.

Throughout the Augsburg process it is also instructive to compare the respective positions of Luther and Melanchthon, for even though Luther did not attend the negotiations he was consulted through correspondence. From the outset, Melanchthon clung to the principle of episcopal recognition.[37] Probably this was because he realized—as few seemed to — that without it reconciliation with Rome and peace with the emperor were impossible. Possibly it was because of deeper theological instincts; perhaps he was naive. Luther, on the other hand, was always dubious about the possibility of such *rapprochement* and fretted lest too much of theological substance was being conceded. On the whole, Melanchthon's "soft" approach did not strike a resonant note in the heart of one so clearly identified with the church militant. Thus, in the midst of the negotiations, Luther wrote to Melanchthon: "Satan is alive and thinks well of your treading lightly and dissimulating in the articles concerning purgatory, the cult of the saints and above all the Pope as antichrist."[38]

Here we see in microcosm a tension that is reflected in Lutheranism, not only at Augsburg, but throughout its long history. On the one hand, there is the view of Luther whose theological presuppositions and concern for the freedom to proclaim the gospel is so strong that, in essence, he has little interest in maintaining episcopal jurisdiction; on the other hand, there is Melanchthon, also fundamentally committed to freedom to proclaim the gospel, but ever reaching out for those

tenuous historical connections that had for so long bound the Christian church together. The recognition of this difference of approach between two of the most powerful influences on the *Augsburg Confession* serves once more to remind us of how careful we must be in evaluating the Lutheran attitude towards the episcopate.

With this background in mind, we are now better equipped to draw a number of conclusions about the early Lutheran approach to ministry.

With certain important modifications—such as the insistence of ministry being subordinated to the Word and the recognition of only a functional difference between presbyters and bishops—Lutherans were willing in principle to operate within the traditional structures of ecclesiastical government. They were prevented from remaining within the orbit of catholic discipline, however, by what they perceived to be the inflexibility of the papal authorities. But although Lutherans found the traditional model of canonical orders and episcopal government acceptable, they did not believe it to be the only legitimate model. Ecclesiastical polity, they argued, was a matter of human institution, not divine prescription, thus if it hindered the proclamation of the Word it could— and must— be modified. It is in this context that we should interpret the strong statements in favour of orthodox orders in the *Confession* and its related documents; their strength rests in the fact that they were offered as concessions to the authorities and also because Melanchthon— who had a deep desire to retain the traditional pattern of ministry—was one of the principal authors of the *Confession*. In the final analysis episcopal government was rejected not on theological grounds, but because the princes did not believe its introduction was politically feasible.

As Lutheranism developed these principles informed and shaped a variety of models of church government, some clearly episcopal, others acknowledging a form of episcopacy in a more guarded way. But in all of this it should be remembered that nowhere in early Lutheranism was any attempt made to provide the blueprint for a permanent form of church government. All that was offered was a number of practical solutions to a very difficult and unusual problem.

IV

In conclusion we can summarize the preceding discussion as follows: In the context of the priesthood of all believers the early Lutheran tradition regarded the ordained ministry as both necessary and as ordained by God. They recognized in principle, however, only a single order of ministry: the difference between bishops and presbyters being purely functional. Above all else, Lutherans emphasized that ministry was derivative of the Word; thus they discussed ministry in light of the Word of God and never attempted to defend an autonomous order of ministers.

Notes

1. The theses were probably never posted. For this allegation see E. Iserloh, *The Theses Were Not Posted* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 76–79.
2. John Reumann, "Ordained Minister and Layman in Lutheranism" in *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*, IV: Eucharist and Ministry (1970) 227.
3. Edgar M. Carlson, "The Doctrine of Ministry in the Confessions," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, 15, 1963, 118ff.
4. Specifically we have in mind: Augsburg Confession, articles 5, 14, 28; Apology of the Augsburg Confession, articles 14 and 28; The Smalcald Articles, Part III. articles 9 and 10; and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope. These sources are to be found in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. T. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).
5. A.G. Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1974), 85–88.
6. *Ibid.*, 67.
7. For this see Lewis W. Spitz, "Luther's Ecclesiology and his Concept of the Prince as *Notbischof*," *Church History*, 22, 1953, 113–41.
8. H. Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought* (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1958), 148.
9. E.G. Rupp, *The Righteousness of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), 316–16.
10. *Luther's Works*, Am. ed., 44:127.
11. For a summary of this see Reumann, 230.
12. Lowell Green, "Change in Luther's Doctrine of the Ministry," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, 18, 1966, 178.
13. R.H. Fisher, "Another Look at Luther's Doctrine of the Ministry," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, 18, 1966, 260-271.
14. Brian Gerrish, "Priesthood and Ministry in the Theology of Luther," *Church History*, 34, 1965, 416. 409.

15. Carlson, "The Doctrine of Ministry," 120.
16. Reumann, 230.
17. Corpus Reformatorum, I, 763.
18. WA., 10. I, 2, p. 239.
19. Reumann, "Ordained Minister and Layman in Lutheranism," 235; see *Treatise*, 60-72.
20. *Augsburg Confession*, Article XVI.
21. *Treatise*, 26. Also Reumann, 235.
22. Henry E. Jacobs, *The Book of Concord*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: G.W. Frederick, 1883), 88. Cf. *Treatise*, 60ff.
23. Jacobs, *The Book of Concord*, 89f.
24. WA., 43, p. 513.
25. *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article XIV.
26. WA., 12, 160–163.
27. WA., 15, 720:11–13; 15, 721:1–5; 17 1, 511:3–5.
28. WA., 26, 195–240.
29. *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article XIV.
30. Jacobs, *The Book of Concord*, 94.
31. Robert Goesser in an unpublished paper sets the *Augustana* into historical context. Most of the historical material that follows is taken from this source.
32. *Treatise*, 61.
33. *Treatise*, 63. This treatise was compiled by the theologians assembled in Smalcald 1537, but represents the main thrust of the Lutheran position both before and after Augsburg. See Reumann, 236–7.
34. Taken from Goeser, 10.
35. On this see Quentin Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 194.
36. See Goeser, 10.
37. *Ibid.*, 8.
38. Taken from W. Pannenberg, "The Confessio Augustana," *The Role of the Augsburg Confession*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 28.