

## Church and Ministry Part 4: The Ministry of the Church

In the next two sessions we turn to the ministry of the church. In this session we will listen to God's Word as he teaches us the source and the meaning of this office. In the following session we will explore the application of this teaching in the governance and life of the church.

Both the Ascension of our Lord and the Feast of Pentecost are occasions to sing again the great Psalm 68, "God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; And to those who hate him shall flee before him!" The exaltation of Christ and his ascension to the Father's right hand are expressed in terms of Israel's passage through the wilderness and the conquest of Canaan: "O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness, the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, before God, the one of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel." The majesty of God is certainly recited, but so is the prophecy of the presence of Jesus in the midst of his church, "The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands; The LORD is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary." (Psalm 68:1, 7-8, 17)

Then comes the great promise, quoted in Ephesians 4, of the gift of ministers, servants of the Word of God, to the church of the New Testament. "You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there." These gifts are the occasion for great jubilation, for rejoicing, thanksgiving, and praise. "O kingdoms of the earth, sing to God, sing praises to the Lord, to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens, behold, he sends out his voice, his mighty voice." (Psalm 68:18, 32-33)

"He sends out his voice, his mighty voice." Here is the assertion that the Word of God is God's own speech. God himself is speaking to us in his Word. All that we have to say about Holy Scriptures is derived from God's own nature and work. God is truthful; his Word is truth. God is wise and eloquent; his Word is clear and convincing. God is just and the justifier of the guilty; it is through his Word that he reckons the sinner justified for the sake of Jesus' blood.

But in the Psalm we sing that he sends out his voice. The ascended Lord, the mighty king to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given (Matthew 28:19), exercises his lordship by sending to his church his own called and ordained servants of his Word.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives and gave gifts to men." (In saying, "he ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who

also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to complete the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:7-12)

Our pastors, the called and ordained servants of the Word of God, are gifts to the church of the living God from our God and Savior Jesus Christ. The ministers exist for the sake of the church. He appoints their ministry for the sake of his voice, the Word of God, by which he heals and restores his saints, carries out the ministry of preaching and the sacraments in their midst, and causes them to grow in grace, in holiness and love, and in readiness for his return.

The gift of his pastors to the church is also a work of mercy and compassion. St. Matthew records (Matthew 9:35-38),

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Jesus himself (Matthew 10:1ff) provided the initial answer to this prayer, "And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. The names of the twelve apostles are these..." and their names are recorded. He sent them out to multiply his own ministry in Israel, to preach the Word of God that he had taught them. When Jesus sent out the seventy-two in Luke 10, he gave this promise, quoted a number of times in our Lutheran Confessions, "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me." (Luke 10:16) As the Confessions remind us, this promise is not given so that the preacher may preach his own word, but that when he preaches God's Word he may be certain that his hearers hear the mighty voice of the Good Shepherd, who gave his life for the sheep.

Already before his passion Jesus was planning for the well-being of his church. He told his disciples in advance concerning the holy ministry. We looked before at Matthew 16:15-19, where Jesus asked his disciples, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not

prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

The teaching which Peter had heard from Jesus, by which the Father had revealed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, would be given also to Peter. This ministry of Peter’s confession would be the foundation upon which Jesus will build his church, so that the church will truly be founded on Jesus himself. St. Paul also taught the same thing in Ephesians 2:19-22,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

All this would be achieved through the ministry of the Word of God, in particular the ministry of forgiving and retaining sins. Jesus foretold this ministry to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:19) This ministry applies forgiveness to repentant sinners, thereby opening heaven to believers, and binds sins upon the unrepentant, thereby closing heaven to unbelievers. What is promised to Peter as the representative of the Apostolic band is repeated to the entire company in the plural (Matthew 18:18-20),

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.

It should be noted that this second prophecy of the ministry of forgiving sins is given after Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep, which concludes (Matthew 18:14), “So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” To this purpose, Jesus commanded the steps for seeking the repentance and reconciliation of the brother who sins, which concludes with the explicit command to excommunicate the unrepentant (Matthew 18:15-17). But in the midst of this familiar passage Jesus tells them to bring the matter to the church. The seeking of the lost, the call to repentance, the excommunication of the persistently unrepentant, the forgiveness given to the repentant brother, and reconciliation with God and with his church, are all bound up with the purpose and work both of the church generally and of the office of the ministry in particular. The ministers will bind or loose sins, but they will do it in the midst of the assembly gathered in the name of Jesus, where they are praying to the

Father of Jesus in agreement with his holy will. Pastors serve in the midst of the church and on her behalf.

It is only after the death of Jesus and at his resurrection that Jesus finally institutes the Office of the Holy Ministry for the New Testament church. He was handed over to death for our sins and was raised again for the justification of sinners by God the Father (Romans 4:25). First came the work of Christ: his righteous obedience as man under the law, his vicarious satisfaction of the wrath of God toward sinners, and, in the resurrection of Jesus, the Father's declaration that he accepted this sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the world. Then comes the ministry of this saving work of Christ. His saving work is the **content** of the Ministry of the Word, its **source**, and its **power**. Without the work of Christ the words of God would be mere empty words (1 Corinthians 15:14), "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." He spells this out in depth at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15:1-4,

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the Word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

Paul repeats the point that the power and the content of the pastoral office of preaching the Word of God and administering the sacraments is the resurrection of the crucified Christ (1 Corinthians 15:17, 20), "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.... But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

As we recite in our Catechism, Jesus instituted the preaching office on the day of his resurrection, as John records it (John 20:19-23):

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Having accomplished peace for their troubled consciences by his death and resurrection, Jesus now comes as the minister of the gospel and, showing them the tokens of his sacrifice and the fact of his resurrection in his body, he bestows that very

peace upon them: "Peace be with you." He deals with them as Christians before he ordains them as ministers. He cleanses and heals their evil consciences from all sins and their guilt and shame before he sends them out to bestow on others this same peace.

Then follows the institution of the office. The institution by God of rites and ceremonies in the church is of great importance in Lutheran doctrine. Luther shows us the way in the Small Catechism, where he teaches us to ask the question, "Where is this written?" "What is Baptism?" And then, "Where is this written?" "What is the Sacrament of the Altar?" And then, "Where is this written?" "What is the Office of the Keys?" And then, "Where is this written?" Only those rites and ceremonies have divine authority which also have divine institution. The institution of the Office of the Keys, the Ministry of Christ's pastors, is this passage in John 20.

Jesus repeats the word of reconciliation with the Father, "Peace be with you." Then he ordains the eleven apostles into office, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." Jesus himself had been sent by the Father into the world with a specific commission, to do the work which God had given him to do. Now Jesus was sending his apostles, the "sent ones," with a commission to carry on his work. This is what the Apostle Paul was meditating upon when he wrote down the Holy Spirit's words concerning reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20),

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the Word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Christ's apostles and pastors are ordained into an office and ministry in which they serve as his ambassadors, with his mandate and authority to deliver the Word of reconciliation.

Jesus then gave his newly ordained apostles gifts for the fulfillment of this ministry, "And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" (John 20:22) The gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed at ordination is not for the sake of the ordinand, but for the sake of the ministry. It is the promise and assurance that the Holy Spirit will produce faith, "where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel." (AC 5.2) The Holy Spirit is bestowed upon the pastor in his ministry so that, as he preaches the word of God in its purity and administers the sacraments according to Christ's command, he will not grow weary or neglect his task, but will have confidence that God is always at work in the ministry of the gospel to bring forth faith and the fruits of repentance and good works.

Then Jesus gives the commission itself: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (John 20:23) This is the ministry of forgiveness summarized in Jesus' friendly greeting, "Peace be with you," which the pastor also says in the communion liturgy after the consecration, "The peace of the Lord be with you always." It is what Jesus had already spoken to the apostles when he sent out the Twelve and commanded them to speak peace upon a house or to let that peace return to them (Matthew 10:13). It is the ministry of reconciliation.

Each of the four gospels gives the mandate of the pastoral ministry, focusing on different aspects of this ministry and filling out our picture of it. Each account is bound up with the death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord. In Matthew's Gospel we read (28:19-20),

And Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The authoritative sending of the apostles is repeated here by the exalted Lord. He institutes Holy Baptism in the Divine Name and the mandate to teach the doctrine and practice of all Scriptures, including all that is instituted in the New Testament. This mandate to teach is comprehensive of all doctrine and practice, including the forgiving and retaining of sins in Matthew 16 and 18 and the institution of Holy Communion in Matthew 26.

Two things should be noted here. First, the main verb of Christ's mandate is that they were to "make disciples." That is, they were to make more students and followers of Jesus, those who believe his Word, share in his life and future, and imitate his piety and way of life. Second, the mandate that is commanded specifically of the ministers of the gospel is a gift that is given to and belongs to the entire church, to all Christians. And the promise that concludes Matthew's Gospel is a promise both for the ministry and for the church. Where the Word of God has free course and is preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, there is the church, there is Christ with all his gifts, there is the Holy Spirit and the wisdom which comes down from above, and there Christians are preserved in steadfast faith, serving God and abiding in the confession of Christ's holy name unto the end.

In Mark's Gospel Jesus repeats the mandate for the pastoral office in this way (16:15-16), "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." As in Matthew, the Office of the Word in the New Testament is universal,

for all times and places. It is for all nations, for the whole creation. The pastor is to preach all that is recorded in Mark's gospel, including the Old Testament Scriptures and the later explanations given in the epistles. Mark began his Gospel with these words, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The gospel begins and ends with Jesus and has its center and fulfillment in Jesus. The one who believes this gospel and is baptized will be saved. The gospel, and the ministry of the gospel, are given for the salvation of all the world.

In Luke's Gospel (24:36-53), as in John's, Jesus gives the institution of the Holy Office on Easter Day, appearing to his disciples alive with these words, "Peace be with you." (Luke 24:36) He calls to their mind "my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you," and that "everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." (Luke 24:44) The institution of the ministry is bound up with this summary of all of Scriptures,

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem." (Luke 24:45-47)

Jesus then speaks to them of the promise of the Holy Spirit to be given at Pentecost, following which he ascends to heaven. In this way Jesus binds up the Preaching Office with his death and resurrection, as well as his ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

All of this is what we find in Articles 4 and 5 of the Augsburg Confession. These two articles presume Article 1, on God himself; Article 2, on original sin; and Article 3, on the person and work of Christ. Article 4 reads,

Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3 and 4. (AC 4, German text)

Article 5, under the title "Concerning the Preaching Office (*Predigtamt*)," continues,

To obtain such 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.

Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that we obtain the Holy Spirit without the external Word of the gospel through our own preparation, thoughts, and works.

The organic unity of these five articles is readily apparent. The Office of giving the gospel and the sacraments is instituted so that God may justify and reconcile sinners to himself through Christ. Throughout these articles, man's work, merit, and will are excluded. Even the preaching office is confessed as God's work, instituted by God, to distribute the Word and sacraments spoken and instituted by God, through which God the Holy Spirit works justifying faith with all the gifts of God for his church, including the fruits of repentance and faith named in Article 6 and elsewhere.

We have already seen in Articles 7 and 8 how this ministry of the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the holy sacraments in conformity with the divine Word, as we confess it in Article 5, belong to the very being and identity of the church. Indeed, we confess that this ministry locates and makes the church manifest to Christians and to the world as the marks of the church. Our Augsburg Confession continues by addressing these marks individually. In Articles 9, 10, and 11 we confess Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Confession (Absolution). Articles 12 and 13 address the repentance that belong to faith and to the right use of the sacraments. Article 14 returns to the preaching office as Christ instituted it for his church:

Concerning church government [or in the Latin text, "Concerning church order"] it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a rightly ordered call. (AC 14, German text)

Some historical background will enlighten the meaning of this brief article. Martin Luther began to realize early in the Reformation that the Roman teaching of salvation through human merit was bound up with the thorough corruption of the ministerial office and the church's liturgical life. At the heart of this corruption was the blasphemous doctrine of the Sacrifice of the Mass. The Roman church asserted (and still asserts) that in the celebration of the Lord's Supper the priest offers an unbloody sacrifice of the body and blood of Jesus to God for the sins of the living and the dead. Behind this heresy lies the teaching that the vicarious sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross did not pay, once and for all, the penalty of God's wrath for the temporal punishment of actual sins. Roman priests, through the so-called indelible character imparted in their ordination, were to offer this sacrifice daily to merit the remittal of these penalties for the church. As Luther teaches us to confess so beautifully and boldly in the Smalcald Articles (Part 2, Second Article), so many of the Roman Catholic church's errors came out of or were bound up with the Sacrifice of the Mass: the papacy itself, purgatory, prayers for the dead, pilgrimages and similar human ceremonies, including the evils of monasticism, relics, indulgences, and the invocation of saints. Their priesthood was thoroughly corrupted by these abuses.

But Luther recognized that in this scheme, not only was justification by human merit promoted and enforced, but the true gospel and its ministry were taken away from Christians. Reformation churches were being denied faithful ministers. They were being taught that God's Word and the sacraments belonged to the pope and his priests. Luther responded by asserting that all Christians were priests, and that the Word and the sacraments were given to all Christians as their own possession. The office which God instituted is not an office of priesthood but an office of service. It is an office of stewardship, in which the minister, serving by Christ's command and in his place, administers and distributes the common possessions of the whole church and of every Christian in it.

Let me emphasize here in a practical way how the priesthood of the baptized works out in daily life. God's Word is given to every Christian, so that he should teach God's Word and confess its doctrine to everyone, according to his station and vocation in life. Fathers, for example, as the head of their household, should read and teach God's Word to his household, especially the Catechism, and should lead them in prayer. He should sing Lutheran hymns with them and lead them in the exercise of virtue by his example. Mothers should teach God's Word to their children and train them in Christian piety. Older women should guide the younger women in this sacred duty. Citizens should apply God's Word to their neighbors in every walk of life, and in particular, to their rulers, by encouraging them to govern with justice and peace according to God's Word. In an emergency, and in the absence of a pastor, any Christian will baptize or absolve another. Every Christian, as God's royal priest, will offer prayers and intercessions for others. He will offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise, and indeed, of his own body, as a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1).

When we confess in Augsburg Confession Article 14 "that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a rightly ordered call," we are acknowledging that God has established an order in the church. Both the German and the Latin texts refer especially to the practical way in which a man is placed into the Office of the Holy Ministry. We will give attention to this question in the next session, when we take up practical applications of our study thus far.

I have discovered, at least in American Christianity, that the idea of divine order is difficult. By divine order I refer to all the many ways that God has arranged the world, including the household, civil government, and the church. God has ordered the angels, the sun and moon and stars, the animals, the plants, the seasons, and all good things. By God's design, everything has its time, place, and purpose. Likewise, God created and divinely instituted male and female, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, children, and other members of the household in a particular order with specific commands and the blessings that belong to that order. God gives authority and specific commands to magistrates and rulers in civil government, and orders those

under authority to pray for their leaders and to obey them, as long as they can do so without disobeying God's clear Word (Acts 5:29).

In the same way, God has established an order in the church that does not negate the orders found in household and civil society. Christian men are still husbands and fathers. Christian women are still wives and mothers. Christian employers and employees carry out their respective vocations in a godly way. Magistrates are to learn God's Word and conform their service in their office accordingly. All receive the same Baptism, the same Absolution, the same divine Word, and the same Lord's Supper. They all pray and sing praises together. But in the church God established one office by which he intends to exercise his care and lordship over the church. This one office is the Office of the Holy Ministry. Other offices may be created from time to time, as the need may suggest, to help the church carry out its work. But until the end of time, God gives and commands us to preserve this one office for the sake of his little flock, the church.

In Romans 10 St. Paul considers at length the place of the preaching office within the church. He says that the righteousness of faith has to do with the Word of God, "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart." He says that, "For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." He quotes Joel 2:32, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Then he teaches us of the divine call into the preaching office, and the purpose and meaning of this office (Romans 10:14-17):

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Let me conclude here by calling to mind again the compassion of Jesus as he looked upon the lost and wandering sheep of Israel who had no shepherd, no preacher to bring them the Word of Christ crucified. Jesus said to his disciples (Matthew 9:37-38), "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."