

Church and Ministry  
Part 5: Ordination, Visitation, and Church Governance

We finished our last session with a quotation from Romans 10 which asked a series of questions that began with faith calling upon the name of the Lord and worked backwards to the divine call of the preacher into his office. God's call to preach is meant to result in believers who call upon God in prayer. The progression is by divine order, but it is also a practical matter. In this session we will take up such practical matters. We will discuss call and ordination first. Then we will proceed to explore what wisdom we can learn from Scriptures regarding how the church orders her life.

Let us begin with an assertion I made in the last session, that there is only one divinely instituted office within the church. We confess this to be the case in our Lutheran Confessions, and it is important because of the place and purpose this office has in God's design. But a brief reading of the New Testament appears, at first glance, to give a different picture. So let us review the different titles and verbs used to describe the ministers of the church and their work.

In my own Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod we most often call our ministers **pastor**, which means shepherd. This title is of course taken from the Lord himself, the Good Pastor, and the prophecies made about him in the Old Testament (for example, Ezekiel 34). Paul tells the elders at Ephesus that the Holy Spirit has made them bishops over their flock, and Peter (1 Peter 5:1-5) tells the elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among them,” and that they will give an account to “the Chief Shepherd.” This title is in a list we saw earlier this week from Ephesians 4, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.” What do we know about these other named offices?

We know from the Gospels and Acts 1 that the **apostles** were a unique office in the ministry, because they were witnesses of the ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus, and because their divine call came directly from their Lord and God Jesus Christ. To them he gave the prophetic delivery of the New Testament Scriptures. They and their associates under them gave to us the Scriptures that we recognize and use as God's own Word. The Apostle Peter gave us this description (2 Peter 1:20-21), “Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” The New Testament canon fulfills the promise of Jesus in John 14:25-26, “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” It is for this reason that the church devotes itself to “the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42) and that the church is “built on the

foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20).

The office of **prophet** corresponds to the Old Testament prophets in this respect, that they preached God's Word to the people. We might be best simply thinking of them as **preachers** of God's Word. In the Old Testament, prophets received direct revelation from God, and their legitimacy as prophets was to be tested by the truthfulness of their preaching and by the miraculous signs and wonders which accompanied their ministry (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:15-22; see 2 Corinthians 12:12). The apostles share in that prophetic office (Mark 16:20), “And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs.” But in 1 Corinthians 14 it does not appear that we are always dealing with direct revelation from God. Rather we seem to have a description of the church's divine service, with preachers ready to speak God's Word.

The **evangelists** appear to be the rough equivalent of what we call missionaries today. They seem to have been sent by the church from one place to another, or to travel through a certain region, in order to bring the Word of God to people for the first time. The apostles were obviously evangelists also. The Apostle Paul tells the local pastors (2 Timothy 4:5), “Do the work of an evangelist.”

**Teacher** is one of the more common terms for this office. “Teach them to keep everything that I have commanded you,” Jesus commands his ministers (Matthew 28:20). Teacher and pastor are clearly closely related terms. The pastor is to teach his flock the whole body of Christian doctrine as it is taught in Holy Scriptures, “the whole council of God.” (Acts 20:27)

**Minister**, which translates the Greek word *deacon*, is a very common term. It is not the same thing as a slave or a household servant, but rather it is an office of service which involves responsibility and honor. Some civil governments use the term minister to designate some of their highest officials. This is the word in its verb form that Jesus uses when he says (Matthew 20:28), “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Our English translations often translate the Greek *episcopos* as overseer, rather than **bishop**. It might better be translated as visitor, because the verb form describes God's visitation of mercy, and to the unrepentant, of judgment. We will return to this group of words later in this session when we discuss church governance.

The word **elder** is a translation of *presbyter*, which sometimes refers simply to an older and respected member of the assembly, sometimes to one of the lay leaders, and when the context indicates, to one of the church's pastors. The Apostle Peter calls

himself an elder and urges his fellow elders to do the work of a pastor and bishop (1 Peter 5:1, 2). It is important to note how interchangeable these various titles are.

We could consider adding other terms to this list of titles. The apostle Paul says that he and his fellow ministers are **household servants** of Christ and **stewards** of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1). In Galatians 6:6 the pastor is called, "**the one who catechizes.**" The pastor could be called a **watchman** (Ezekiel 33) because he is commanded to "watch out" for those who teach false doctrine (Romans 16:17). But it is evident, in comparing the various titles and the instructions given concerning them, that they all pertain to the one office which is to teach the Word of God rightly and distribute the sacraments according to the command of Christ.

Here we should note that the Office of the Holy Ministry is not given any particular form or structure in the New Testament Scriptures. The threefold episcopal structure of bishop, priest, and deacon was an early development in the church, but by no means universal. Some churches were led by a college of presbyters. One pastor per church or group of small churches was probably more often the norm. Historically, deacons may or may not have been ordained, depending on the tasks which were assigned them. The Lutherans did not reject the episcopal structure they had inherited, where it could be used without sin, but were at pains to make clear the equality, by divine right, of all those in the office (see the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope). We Lutherans still struggle to honor the essential equality of all ministers, while also making use of needed distinctions for the sake of good order in the church.

The pastoral office is often best recognized by noticing what the pastor is to be doing publicly. He is to baptize and teach God's Word. He is to proclaim or preach the gospel, the Word of God. He is to forgive sins in the name of Christ and his church. He is to be the steward of the mysteries of God, that is, he is to give out all the treasures of Christ which have been given to the church, and he is to do so according to Christ's own command. In the case of the Lord's Supper, he is to give the sacrament to some and not to others, according to God's own Word.

Paul tells Timothy that the Scriptures that he uses are profitable for teaching doctrine, rebuking, correcting, and educating in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). Often the Septuagint and the New Testament Scriptures use the Greek word *laleo* to indicate their public or official speaking. This word is often translated simply as "speak," as in the Holy Spirit's proscription in 1 Corinthians 14:33-34, "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted **to speak**, but should be in subordination, as the Law also says." They are not allowed to take up the public Office of the Word, as the Scriptures affirm elsewhere. The pastor is the public speaker in the church, Christ's own personally appointed representative.

We turn now to the question of how the church receives or obtains her pastors. We previously mentioned the challenges that arose during the Reformation. The Roman Catholic bishops refused to ordain Lutheran candidates or to provide them pastors who would preach and administer the sacraments according to Holy Scriptures. Luther and his coworkers were extremely reluctant to disrupt the late medieval order of things. At first they were able to use priests that had converted to Luther's doctrine. They began to defend the church's right to call and ordain her own ministers. Eventually, they were not only training future pastors, but they began to examine and ordain them. At the same time, some of the radical reformers were rejecting ordination and the office of the ministry entirely. Their preachers were to preach as laymen. The Lutherans were sometimes associated with these radical reformers.

Augsburg Confession Article 14 is the Lutherans' response to this situation. In fact, it was the final article added to the Confession in the preparations for its presentation on June 25, 1530.

Concerning church government [or "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)

We are considering now the phrase, "rightly ordered call": in German, *Ordentliche Beruf*, or in Latin, *rite vocatus*. Both texts refer distinctly to the correct order and procedure for calling and ordaining a pastor. Although this short article does not provide any of the Scriptural texts from which it is taken, it is clearly drawn from the Romans 10 passage about calling preachers, the example of Christ's call of the apostles, and the many instructions given in the pastoral epistles and elsewhere in the New Testament. The paragraphs that follow will outline the "rightly ordered call" in three parts: the formation and examination of candidates, the divine call, and ordination.

The apostle Paul writes (1 Timothy 3:1), "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task." The church's first task in identifying a candidate for the preaching office is that of examination (1 Timothy 3:10), "And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless." Paul warns Timothy and Titus not to "lay hands on," that is, ordain a man, too hastily (1 Timothy 5:22) nor to make "a new convert" (1 Timothy 3:6) into a pastor. This first part of the rightly ordered call requires time and labor and includes what our seminaries call the formation of the man, examining him regarding his personal and spiritual qualifications, and testing him for soundness of doctrine.

We find in both 1 Timothy and Titus the description for the personal and spiritual qualifications of a pastor. Each of the lists of qualifications is given under the heading: "He must be above reproach." (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6, 7) An examination of these lists shows that what the Holy Spirit teaches is that the pastor is to be a pious

Christian, a man who exhibits in his own personal life, character, and conduct that he is a man “of good repute, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). The virtues given in these lists are universal to all Christians. The pastor is required to have his marriage, children, and household in good and godly order, but this is an expectation that applies to every Christian household. St. Paul gives the reason for these qualifications when he writes (1 Timothy 4:12), “Set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity,” and (Titus 2:7-8), “Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned.” One example will serve to illustrate. Here is the Apostle Paul’s charge to Titus,

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might set straight the remaining things and appoint presbyters in every city, as I ordered you. If anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having believing children who do not have the accusation of debauchery nor are disorderly. For it is necessary that the bishop be above reproach as the steward of God, not self-willed, not pugnacious, not greedy for shameful gain, but rather hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, just, holy, self-disciplined, holding fast to the faithful Word according to the doctrine, so that he may be able to comfort (or encourage) with sound doctrine and rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1:5-9)

Each list requires the candidate for office to be a man who, if he is married, is lawfully married to only one woman. His ability to teach is listed as a particularly important aptitude. He is to show in himself basic qualities of manhood: leadership, self-sacrifice, the physical strength and stamina needed for the demands of the office, and the like. Paul gives himself as an explicit example of a pastor who disciplines his body for the sake of his office (1 Corinthians 9:27). He urges the same discipline to Timothy in the physical care of his body and exercise (1 Timothy 4:8, 5:23).

Above all, the candidate for the pastoral office must be competent in his understanding and use of Holy Scriptures and in the soundness of his doctrine. He must be prepared to fulfill the charge given to Timothy:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:1-5)

Likewise from 1 Timothy chapter 4:11-13:

Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.

It is best if the pastor is able to read the Holy Scriptures in their original Greek and Hebrew (and Aramaic), if at all possible, since God the Holy Spirit gave his Word in those languages. After all, the Word of God provides the pastor the entire content and structure of his ministry. Note that in this passage he calls the pastor by an Old Testament title for prophets: man of God:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

As can be seen from these Scripture texts, the candidate for the office of pastor is to be educated and formed in his heart, mind, and character. He will ideally be taught by men who are also in the office, and will be examined by them. Of course, in an emergency, when no other pastor can be obtained, the church will take a man from their midst whom they will examine, and they will call and ordain him so that they will have a pastor. But even then they will do everything in their power to confirm their actions by obtaining his confirmation by faithful pastors.

A man who has been educated and examined for his suitability for the Holy Ministry is then certified by the church as qualified for the office. Then comes the second of the three parts of the "rightly ordered call." The church calls the man into a specific field of service. The call would ordinarily come from a congregation according to its own usual order. It could come from a consistory or board designated for the purpose. Historically, the call has at times also come from individuals such as a prince or a bishop, though this is far from ideal. A key element in the divine call is that it expresses the willingness and consent of those who will receive his ministry to have him as their pastor.

But within all these human elements, the divinity of the call is found in the reality that God himself calls his own man to be his minister to his people. This is what Jesus himself said in the institution of the Holy Office (John 20:21), "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And Jesus says to the preachers he sends out (Luke 10:16), "He who hears you hears me." For this same reason the apostle Paul says to the

pastors of Ephesus (Acts 20:28), "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you bishops, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."

The divine call is to a specific man for a specific place or field of service, "the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you bishops" (Acts 20:28), or, "the flock of God that is among you... those in your charge" (1 Peter 5:2, 3). The divine call is not an "inner call," which would be by its very nature private and unverifiable. It is, like preaching and to the sacraments, external and public. After the days of the apostles, every divine call is a mediated call, that is, a call that comes from God through his church, according to its usual order.

The third part of the "rightly ordered call" is ordination. We must make clear distinctions here. What God commands is his Word and prayer for the ordinand. These belong to the divine institution of the Office. The laying on of hands is an apostolic custom which should not be omitted, which is, nevertheless, not instituted by Christ. Jesus himself did not ordain with the laying on of hands but by breathing upon his apostles. What is not given is the "indelible character" claimed for their priests by the Roman Catholics. In the Apology Article 13 we confess,

But if ordination is understood with reference to the ministry of the Word, we have no objection to calling ordination a sacrament. For the ministry of the Word has the command of God and has magnificent promises.... For the church has the mandate to appoint ministers, which ought to please us greatly because we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it. (Apology 13.11, 12)

Our Confession here refers to Romans 1:16 and Isaiah 55:11 as evidence of God's magnificent promises for the ministry. Paul recalls Timothy's ordination as he exhorts him to carry out his office: "Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders [the "presbytery"] laid their hands on you." (1 Timothy 4:14) Timothy was to derive comfort, strength, and help from his ordination.

Call and ordination are the means by which God himself calls a man and places him into the office. The ordination is the "sending" of God. Three things take place in the ordination. First, a blessing is given for the office. The Holy Spirit with his gifts are given not for the man in the office, but for the office itself, for help in the performance of the office and also for the judgment of the false teacher.

Second, the ordination confirms the legitimacy of the call. It is the public testimony concerning the formation and examination of the candidate, that he is fit and ready for service. It affirms that the congregation or congregations of the church have called him or given their consent for his service according to a right, orderly, and mutually accepted way.

Third, and connected to the first two, ordination provides the testimony to the whole church concerning the candidate and his divine call. While the call itself is for a specifically located field of service, ordination applies to the whole church, including any potential future fields of service. A pastor is not re-ordained for a new field of service, though he can be removed from the ministerium for just cause. Ordination is, therefore, the conferral of the office to the candidate, an action of God on behalf of the whole church. It is the answer to the ongoing prayer of the church according to our Lord's command, "Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

In the remainder of our time in this session, I would like to give you in a preliminary way some items to consider regarding how the church beyond the local congregation organizes herself. There is, of course, no particular form of church governance instituted in Scriptures, beyond the local congregation with her pastor. This is not to say that relationships between congregations and regions of the church have no doctrinal significance, as is abundantly clear in the examples given in Acts and the epistles. A variety of forms of governance can be seen over the course of time around the world, including among Lutherans. But there must be some sort of arrangement, even if informal, because God is not a God of confusion and disorder, but the God of peace.

The basic structure of the church is that of the congregation, preacher and hearers, by God's command. The rightly ordered call, including examination, divine call, and ordination, also belong to the structure and governance of the church and are essential to it by divine institution. The challenge that remains is to provide mutual encouragement and support to both pastors and congregations, to acknowledge and maintain "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" where it is found, and to provide mutual help in maintaining this unity in the purity of doctrine and Christian piety among the churches. I will encourage you to read the epistles of the New Testament, especially the three written to Timothy and Titus, in the light of this challenge.

In the Book of Acts the Holy Spirit suggests a way forward for the church in responding to this last challenge. We read how the Word of God spread and the churches grew from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). We see, over the course of time, how God brought Jewish and Gentile Christians together into one church. We are shown how the church handles theological controversy in the Jerusalem synod (Acts 15). We see how outreach is done both to those who are acquainted with Holy Scriptures and to those who know nothing about it. In particular, we see how churches are planted.

Partway through the Book of Acts we also see how the apostles and their associates care for the wellbeing of the churches and maintain their unity with the rest of the church. In Acts 14:21-22, for example, Paul and Barnabas return to visit churches



they began to establish in their missionary journey. You will see the common elements of preaching the gospel, making disciples (Matthew 28:19–20), and appointing pastors through a rightly ordered call. But observe also the description of their work in each place:

When they had **preached the gospel** to that city and had **made many disciples**, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, **strengthening** the souls of the disciples, **encouraging** them to continue in the faith, and [saying] that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had **appointed elders** for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:21–22)

The verb that describes this entire action is “visit,” in Greek, *episkopeo*. Noun forms of this verb provide us the words “bishop,” “office of bishop,” and “visitation.” God’s visitation might be for judgment or, more often in Luke’s Gospel, salvation. The crowd exclaims in Luke 7:16, at the raising of the widow’s son at Nain, “God has visited his people.” Two verbs in the passage just quoted (Acts 14:21–22) are particularly associated with the pastors who performed this office of visitation: “encourage” (also translated “comfort” or “exhort”) and “strengthen.” We rejoice in the Holy Spirit as the **Comforter**, the One who gives us consolation, encouragement, and exhortation. Visitors to the churches of God came to provide this kind of comfort and encouragement from God’s Word. They also came to **strengthen** the churches and their pastors. Jesus tells Peter on the night of his betrayal (Luke 22:32), “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, **strengthen** your brothers.” Those who visit the churches come to strengthen them with instruction, discipline, guidance, and help from God’s Word.

Examples abound in the Book of Acts. After the Jerusalem Synod in Acts 15 the leaders of the church sent pastors Judas and Silas to Antioch, where the controversy had particularly hurt the church, and they “**encouraged** and **strengthened** the brothers with many words” (Acts 15:32) Afterwards (Acts 15:36, 41), Paul proposed another visitation to the congregations they had established in their previous journey, “Let us return and **visit** the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the Word of the Lord, and see how they are.” And he did so, “**strengthening** the churches.” This work, often described using this language, is repeated in Paul’s care of the various congregations named in his epistles. In fact, the Pastoral Epistles to Timothy and Titus might better be named as Visitation Epistles, because they describe and mandate the essential work of visitation in new and maturing churches. Timothy and Titus are not so much pastors of local congregations as they are bishops or visitors of a region of churches. Paul instructs them to visit the pastors and congregations under their care with the counsel given in the epistles. Paul also charges them with the responsibility of providing seminary training, examination, followed by call and ordination, for new pastors.

When Luther was working through the problem of reforming the church's care of all the Lutheran churches in his territories and establishing the practices and structure to support that care, he turned to the Holy Scriptures for guidance. He noted that in both the Old and New Testaments the prophets, and later Jesus and the apostles, traveled about visiting God's people to bring them the encouragement and edification of God's Word. Luther himself had made such visitations when he held office in the local district of Augustinian monasteries. He proposed this theological framework for visitation among the churches in his Preface to the "Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony" (1528, AE 40:262 -320; WA 26.195-240). He wrote,

For it was in this kind of activity that the bishops and archbishops had their origin – each one was obligated to a greater or lesser extent to visit and examine. For, actually, bishop means supervisor or visitor, and archbishop a supervisor or visitor of bishops, to see to it that each parish pastor visits and watches over and supervises his people in regard to teaching and life. And the archbishop was to visit, watch over, and supervise the bishops as to their teaching. (AE 40.269-70)

Luther observed what happened among the churches when such visitation was neglected, "No attention is paid to how one teaches, believes, loves, how one lives a Christian life, how to care for the poor, how one comforts the weak, or punishes the unruly, and whatever else belongs to such an office." (AE 40.270) Luther lamented that from such lack of care and attention, false doctrines arise, the people and their pastors descend into various vices and sins, souls are destroyed, and churches suffer division and destruction.

Luther recognized that this office and practice of visitation, like any form of governance that may be established, would require the goodwill of the churches, and especially of their pastors.

We yet hope that all devout and peaceable pastors who find their sincere joy in the gospel and delight to be of one mind with us will act as St. Paul teaches in Phil. 2[:2]. . . . We hope they will not ungratefully and proudly despise our love and good intention, but will willingly, without any compulsion, subject themselves in a spirit of love to such visitation and with us peacefully accept these visitors until God the Holy Spirit brings to pass something that is better, through them or through us. (AE 40.271-72)

So also he prayed and exhorted,

May God, the Father of all mercy, grant us through Jesus Christ, his dear Son, the Spirit of unity and the power to do his will. . . . The devil has become neither pious nor devout this year, nor will he ever be so. So let us be on our guard and

anxious to keep (as Paul teaches) the spiritual unity in the bond of love and of peace [Eph. 4:3]. Amen. (AE 40.273)

Finally, as a last word of encouragement regarding visitation, listen to how we have, in our Lutheran Confessions, committed ourselves to this visitation among ourselves. Here is what we commit ourselves to in the Preface to *The Book of Concord*:

Likewise, we desire furthermore to agree in a friendly way among ourselves earnestly, using whatever means possible, to maintain this work of concord in our lands, according to our own and each community's circumstances, through diligent visitation in the churches and schools, through supervision of the presses, and through other salutary means. And should the present controversies about our Christian religion again surface or new ones arise, we agree that to protect against all kinds of scandal they be settled and reconciled in a timely way before given a chance to spread. (BOC Preface.24)

God grant this blessing here in this place also!