

The Ministry of Word and Sacraments: A Teaching Document of Augsburg Lutheran Churches

Ministry of Word and Sacraments

In Ephesians the Apostle defines the Ministry of Word and Sacraments. The ministry is:

to preach...the unsearchable riches of Christ, and make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places (Ephesians 3:8b-10).

But what is this “plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God?” It is that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself...For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:19-21). It is the word of the cross.

That is, through the death of his Son on the cross, the Triune God established his own righteousness...[dealing with the problem of sin and death] his own way...alone without us, and it is finished... [Simultaneously] it reveals our need of the Savior and the Savior we need [(*simul iustis et peccator*)].¹

The word of the cross is: we are elected to eternal life solely for the sake of Christ’s death and resurrection, apart from any merit or worthiness in us (Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:18,21). Through this Word alone God puts us to death and raises us to new life (Romans 6:4), that is, he creates faith.²

Thus the ministry is most properly the ministry of the proclamation, in both word and sacraments, of this word of the cross which the LORD says “shall not return to me empty but...shall accomplish that which I purpose” (Isaiah 55:11). Authorized by God himself (John 20:23; Matthew 18:18), it is the concrete, audible, down-to-earth, person-to-person declaration of this electing word which does what it says—the living voice of the gospel (*viva vox evangelii*).³

¹ *Our Declaration*, 5.2 It is the nature of the word of the cross to expose the sinner in the very act of proclaiming Christ. “The word of the cross is always both law and gospel. On this side of death we are always completely caught by sin and fully forgiven through the gospel. The one justified continues to be subject to sin: we are obedient to the will of God, yet against our own will” (Ibid., 5.4, see also 5.3). Gerhard Forde summarizes this understanding that we are simultaneously sinners and righteous: “If God *imputes* righteousness, if God simply *forgives* sin, then we must be sinners. It would make no sense for God to impute righteousness if we were partially or wholly righteous already. God would be wasting breath. Thus in order for *God* to be ‘justified when he speaks and true when he judges’ (Psalm 51:4) we must be sinners *at the same time* as God’s speaking makes us righteous. One is justified by hearing and believing God’s judgment, and such hearing and believing lead to the realization and confession that we *are* sinners. We are unmasked by the overpowering divine judgment. The love given reveals, at the same time, how unlovely we are. Only on the strength of the love given could we see and face the truth simultaneously” (Gerhard Forde, *Christian Dogmatics, Volume Two*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984], pp. 407-408). See also Martin Luther’s comments on Romans 4:1-7 in his *Lectures on Romans*, trans. and ed. W. Pauck, LCC 15 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 129; *LW* 25:262.

² *Our Declaration*, 5.3. Of course, this is simply to state Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession (On Justification) from the perspective of the ministry of the Word. Article 4 states: “It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ 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, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5” (CA 4). All teaching (including teaching about the ministry) and practice are to be tested by the sole criterion of whether they further this proclamation of the justification of the ungodly by faith alone which is the article upon which the church stands or falls” (*Our Declaration* 5.4).

³ The primary paradigm for ministry in this proper sense is the absolution: “In obedience to our Lord’s command, I declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” See *Theology is for Proclamation*, Gerhard Forde, p. 178. Edgar Carlson also views the declaration of the absolution as the beating heart of the office of the ministry. “That which the minister does as the official and essential function of his office, in behalf of the church, is to absolve from sin. Absolution is his most official and characteristic pronouncement.” Edgar M. Carlson, “The Doctrine of the Ministry in the Confessions,” *The Lutheran Quarterly*, p. 5.

The classic expression for Lutheran teaching on the nature of the ministry therefore is Article 5 of the *Augsburg Confession*: “To obtain such [justifying] faith *God established the office of preaching*,⁴ that is, provided the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the gospel.”⁵

We exclude any teaching that denigrates the divine institution of the ministry as if it were merely a matter of human order subject to human discretion.⁶

any teaching that suggests that the Holy Spirit and faith may come to us apart from this divinely instituted ministry of the external word of the gospel and the sacraments.⁷

Ministers of Word and Sacraments

By its very nature the ministry requires ministers. Since the ministry is “*to preach*,” there must be preachers; since “*God established the office of preaching*,” it *must* be exercised; since the Holy Spirit “works faith, where and when he pleases, in those who *hear the Gospel*” (and receive the sacraments), the gospel must be *spoken* (and the sacraments administered). The gospel is never a disembodied word. It is always incarnate.⁸ Someone must speak it!

For “every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”... But how are men to call upon him in who 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 a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news” (Romans 10:12-15).

Someone must actually do the deed, declaring the word of forgiveness. Therefore the crucified and risen Christ commands and sends real people, his disciples, to do just that, to forgive sins, to speak the word of the cross.

⁴ Emphasis added. The German text reads: “Gott hat das Predigtamt eingesetzt...” The translation is Gerhard Forde’s. *Ibid.*, p. 185. Tappert renders the German as follows: “God instituted the office of the ministry.” The Latin text reads: “*institutum est ministerium*,” which Tappert renders: “the ministry... was instituted.” (*BC*, p. 31).

⁵ AC 5 §§ 1-2; *BC*, p. 31. While the *Small Catechism* does not mention the ministry directly, the explanation to the third article of the creed strongly implies it by making the principle activity of the Spirit in the church the forgiveness of sins (i.e. the absolution): “In this Christian church he daily and abundantly forgives all my sins, and the sins of all believers” (*SC*, III § 6; *BC*, p. 345). The *Large Catechism* is specific about the ministry: “Further we believe that in this Christian church we have the forgiveness of sins, which is granted through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire Gospel. Toward forgiveness is directed everything that is to be preached concerning the sacraments and, in short, the entire Gospel and all the duties of Christianity” (*LC*, III § 54).

⁶ “In the first place, the office is a divine institution, not a human invention. It is not an option the churches may or may not exercise. The office is God’s idea, not ours, because God provided the gospel and the sacraments. God insisted on making the mystery public through the proclamation. ... The office, that is, is instituted by virtue of the fact that God has gone public in and through Jesus Christ, the gospel and the sacraments. By virtue of what happened to Jesus, the gospel and the sacraments are given, and with them ministry is demanded. The gospel and the sacraments demand the office. God thereby instituted the office.” Forde, p. 185.

⁷ AC 5 § 4; *BC* p. 31. Also, in the *Smalcald Articles* Luther writes: “Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil” (*SA*, III, 8 § 10; *BC*, p. 313).

⁸ This view of the ministry flows directly out of Luther’s understanding of the incarnation and the crucifixion. God does not come to us in his naked majesty (which would destroy us) but in the lowly form of the babe of Bethlehem. Paradoxically, in order to reveal himself to us in a manner in which we can have fellowship with him he hides himself (Isaiah 45:14). It is faith alone that comprehends that it is God himself lying in the manger suckling his mother’s breast. On Golgotha the very gift of salvation is hidden in the darkness and death of Jesus’ agonized cry of dereliction: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Likewise in the ministry of word and sacraments God hides himself in the very act of revealing himself, for the word of God is simultaneously a human word spoken from human lips. Luther gives classic expression to this in his treatise *The Bondage of the Will*: “...faith’s object is not seen. That there may be room for faith, therefore, all that is believed must be hidden. Yet it is not hidden more deeply than under a contrary appearance of sight, sense and experience. Thus when God quickens, He does so by killing; when he justifies, He does so by pronouncing guilty; when he carries up to heaven, He does so by bringing down to hell” (Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, [London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1957], p. 101). Thus the word spoken by God’s ministers is the word of the cross not only in content (i.e. words which speak of the cross) but in its very form as well.

Jesus said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send 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; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:21-23).

Because the essence of the ministry is the sheer, self-authenticating⁹ declaration of God’s electing and forgiving word, it cannot be confined to places, persons or special orders,¹⁰ but belongs to the whole church¹¹ as both its privilege and its task. All Christians are authorized and obligated by Christ’s command. All Christians are priests and ministers (1 Peter 2:4-10; Revelation 5:9-10).¹² Baptism is their “ordination.”¹³ There is only one holy order and it is universal—the priesthood of all believers.¹⁴ As Luther states: “Whoever comes out of the water of Baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop and pope.”¹⁵ Before God, he writes, there is no distinction between clergy and laity.

There is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between the religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do.¹⁶

⁹ The gospel is self-authenticating because the basis of its authority is not found in anything external to itself, such as an infallible teaching magisterium, or a theory of scriptural inerrancy, but consists solely in “its power to convict of sin and convince of grace through the work of the Holy Spirit. The gospel, so to speak, establishes its own transcendence. Its truth becomes known and its authority acknowledged only upon being heard through the Word, received in the sacraments, and believed through the power of the Spirit” (Our Declaration 5.2 citing *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 6* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), pp.62-63.). “We exclude the belief that anyone or anything (such as bishops in an historic episcopate) except the Word of the cross ‘safeguards’ the gospel or establishes its ‘fidelity.’ The gospel authenticates itself” (Our Declaration 5.5).

¹⁰ “The ministry of the New Testament is not bound to places and persons as the Levitical priesthood is, but is spread abroad through the whole world and exists wherever God gives his gifts, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers. Nor is this ministry valid because of any individual’s authority but because of the Word given by Christ” (Tr. § 26; *BC*, p. 324).

¹¹ “The keys are a function and power given to the church by Christ to bind and loose sins” (SA, III, 7 § 1; *BC*, p. 311). “...it is necessary to acknowledge that the keys do not belong to the person of one particular individual but to the whole church” (Tr. § 24; *BC*, p. 324).

¹² A subtle but important distinction may be drawn between the terms “priesthood” and “ministry.” The biblical conception of the priesthood is rooted in the idea of offering sacrifice. Christ the true High Priest offered himself “once for all” (Hebrews 9:12, 25-26; 10:10) and made “a single sacrifice for our sins” (Hebrews 10:11-12). Consequently the only proper sacrifice left for the priesthood of those who have been justified “by his blood” (Romans 3:25) is to offer ourselves as “a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1) in acts of love and service for our neighbor. Seen in this way the universal priesthood expresses itself in all the vocations of daily life through which God provides for our needs. “Ministry,” on the other hand, is more specifically focused on obedience to God’s command to publicize his gracious decision for us in Christ. Ministers are authorized to speak for the King. They are his ambassadors. As Paul states, “...we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 6:20). Not everything a Christian does therefore is ministry. Ministry always involves speaking the gospel in some way. One might, therefore, speak of “the priesthood of the baptized” when referring to the entire range of tasks and callings by which God places us in service to each other. Likewise, when speaking of our specific mandate as Christians to bear witness to the gospel, it would be appropriate to speak of “the ministry of the baptized.” See Forde’s discussion in *Theology is for Proclamation*, p. 180.

¹³ Luther writes, “Paul says in I Corinthians 12 [12-13] that we are all of one body, yet every member has its own work by which it serves the others. This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people...” (Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” *LW* 44:130).

¹⁴ The universal priesthood or the priesthood of all believers is inherent in the doctrine of justification itself. Justification does not only mean that sinners are set free *from* the guilt and punishment of sin, but also that they are set free *to* appear before God with their service (Romans 5:1-2). In Christ the distinction between the sacred and the secular has been shattered. Since Christ has freed us from despairingly seeking “upward” to satisfy an angry God by our “religious” works we can devote ourselves “downward,” so to speak, to the earthly and worldly tasks of life solely for the benefit of our neighbor. They have all, down to the very lowliest, become holy offerings to God without exception or distinction.

¹⁵ Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” *LW* 44:129.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

We exclude any suggestion that the ministry of the gospel can occur without ministers, i.e., apart from oral proclamation in word and sacraments spoken from one person to another.

any view of the ministry that depends upon theories about holy orders, status (e.g., indelible character), and succession (e.g. the historic episcopate) and does not flow directly from the self-authenticating word of the gospel itself.¹⁷

any view of the ministry that recognizes a distinction between clergy and laity with respect to their status before God and their common obligation under the gospel to preach the word and administer the sacraments.

The Public Ministry of Word and Sacraments

If it is true that all are “ordained” priests and ministers by Baptism, then why not abolish the distinction between clergy and laity entirely and absolutely? If there is no basic difference in their status before God (ontological or otherwise!), or their obligation under the gospel, then why not drop the terms altogether?

The classic Lutheran answer to these questions finds its voice in Article 14 of the *Augsburg Confession*: “It is taught among us that nobody should *publicly* teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call.”¹⁸

Since the ministry is to “*make all men see* what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God,”—since it exists to “*[make] known to the principalities and powers*” “the manifold wisdom of God,”—the ministry is in its very essence a *public* affair which culminates in a *public office*.¹⁹ As such, it exists alongside other public offices such as judge, police officer, senator and the like.²⁰

Uniquely and radically, however, this office announces the limit and end of all other offices. “For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified” (Romans 10:4). Through the public ministry of word and sacraments God invades “this age... [which is] doomed to pass away” (1 Corinthians 2:6) and establishes the new as a beachhead, as it were, in hostile territory for all to see. One who serves in this ministry is the public emissary of the

¹⁷ Cf. Forde, “A Response to the Concordat of Agreement,” 1997, p. 1. “The Lutheran view of ministry flows from the gospel and not from theories about priesthood and succession. All Christians are priests. Baptism is their “ordination.” Ministers have the specific function of getting the gospel into the public scene. *Lutherans cannot concede to other views of the priesthood and ministry without compromising the gospel...*” Emphasis added.

¹⁸ AC, 14; BC, p. 36.

¹⁹ The term “office” is used here to convey the sense of the authority and obligation to speak publicly on another’s behalf. When passing sentence, for instance, the judge does not speak in his own person but in his “office,” that is, as the voice of the people. It is the people who pass judgment in the person of the judge as he exercises his office. In this sense, when the publicly called minister speaks in his office it is not the minister who speaks but the Lord Jesus Christ. The use of the term “office,” can of course be misleading if it is conceived as a sort of floating, independent entity apart from the flesh and blood office holder. In that case, the office is not only distinguished but wholly separated from its exercise. When this happens it tends to take on the character of an aura or mantle of status and privilege which is bestowed upon certain individuals who have been set apart from the rest of the community. This of course is precisely what happens in the sacerdotal (i.e. sacrificial) priesthood of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Anglicanism. The free-standing office, conferred by means of the sacrament of ordination, bestows an ontologically distinct indelible character (*character indelibilis*), which is a prerequisite for performing priestly duties. Ultimately the consequent move to the so-called “three-fold” office of bishop, priest, and deacon (bestowing distinct spiritual status upon each of various pastoral functions respectively) flows naturally and consequently from such an understanding. The Protestant rejection of the sacerdotal priesthood, however, is no guarantee of safety either. Separating the office from its exercise can also result in the idea that it bestows a special social or political status (e.g., clergy are entitled by their office to free country club memberships or to use it as leverage in political advocacy). All this, particularly when coupled with instances of abuse and high handed clericalism leads to the demeaning of the office by the very public it is intended to serve, to anti-clericalism. Luther, of course, eschewed abstracting the office from the person, the title from the service in this manner. Just as there is no disembodied word, there is likewise no disembodied office. For the confessions as well the one office of the ministry (not three-fold office!) is viewed not as status but as obedient service and duty to the good news of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ. It is not a right to be held and protected but a duty to be exercised. Only in this light does the term retain its rightful, proper, and necessary use (See the remainder of the section, esp. footnote 21).

²⁰ Edgar Carlson describes the public ministry precisely in this way. “As the policeman, in behalf of the state, calls men to account for their civil violations, and as the judge, in behalf of the state, pronounces sentence upon the guilty and acquittal for the innocent, so the minister, in behalf of the church and its Lord, pronounces forgiveness to the guilty penitent. The minister is the ‘absolver’ from sin.” Carlson, p. 5.

crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ to the world—to the “principalities and powers.” Such a one is in the truest and most literal sense a “public official.”²¹

It is in this culmination of the ministry into a public office, and here alone, that one may distinguish between clergy and laity. Not all are called to serve in the public ministry.²² Thus, there is a legitimate distinction (before man, not before God!)²³ between clergy and laity in the same manner as there is a distinction between anyone called to public service, in government, for example, and those who are called to other, less public, types of vocations. Clergy are those who are “regularly called,” in the sense of being called to public service in the ministry of Word and sacraments. Laity are called to exercise the ministry (also of Word and sacraments) in more personal and, one might even say, more “private” and “unofficial” ways (e.g., in family, at the workplace, between individuals, among Christians).

When the question about who should exercise this ministry publicly is asked, Article 14 answers, “Only one who has a regular call.” That is to say, no one may exercise the public ministry of word and sacraments by self-appointment. Those who attempt to do so are enemies of the gospel and destroyers of Christ’s sheep (John 10:1-5). The call to public ministry must come from outside oneself (*extra nos*); it can never be self-chosen. The public minister must be under orders, “[f]or it is God’s will that nothing be done as a result of one’s own choice or decision, but everything as a consequence of a command or a call.”²⁴ This is true in the first place because the call to public ministry is not from man but from God (2 Corinthians 4:1ff) who instituted it by the giving of his word.²⁵ It is true in the second place

²¹ Forde writes: “Public exercise of the office does not simply mean that it is done “in public.” It gets its meaning rather from the fact that for the confessors Christianity was a public cult (*cultus publicus*). It belonged, that is, to the “republic” (*republica*). The ordained ministry was in that sense akin to a public official who was authorized to do the public acts of the cult in and for the people. The ordained minister was to make public proclamation of and public argument for the Word of God, to care for the public witness and theology of the church, to administer the sacraments as public acts, and to call the public and its magistrates to public account before divine law... [This public exercise of the office, however, has to be publicly ordered. Only those regularly called are so ordered... Ordination does not mean elevation to some higher order, but rather invasion of the order of this world with the Word of the gospel to announce God’s claim upon the world. In spite of pressures to privatize, the church must not surrender this claim to public office. Here the church carries through on God’s eschatological claim.” (Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, p. 180-184).

²² It is helpful here to distinguish between the “ministry of the baptized,” held in common by all, and the particular vocation of the “public ministry,” held by one who has been “regularly called.”

²³ *Coram humano*, not *coram Deo*! Regin Prenter summarizes this difference between viewing the distinction between clergy and laity and their respective callings before God as opposed to viewing them before man: “... before God every distinction of place and position as it applies between human beings fades into nothingness. Our standing before God is not determined by the stations in which we are placed in our relations to other people, but rather by the relation in which *he* has placed us in baptism, making us his children and brothers and sisters in Christ. There is simply no other standing for us in relation to God than that of the position of a child which we all have alike through baptism. And in this position we are all *the same*... But what then is the difference between a pastor in his station in life and others in their stations in life? It is a difference which applies only to persons, namely that the priest has a different office, i.e. a different assignment from his fellow human beings from, for example, the prince or the farmer, in that he is obligated to serve them with the gospel and sacraments of God. As soon as Luther ceases to view the station of the pastor in relation to God and views it in relation to the stations of others he can readily speak of the loftiness of the station of the pastor in comparison with all other stations. Let us again for a moment give Luther the floor and see how high he can soar in praise of the clerical estate when he characterizes it as one of many stations among human beings. I will cite some lines from his sermon *On Keeping Children in School* from 1530. ‘I hope, indeed, that believers, those who want to be called Christians, know very well that the spiritual estate [i.e. the public ministry] has been instituted and established by God, not with gold or silver but with the precious blood and bitter death of his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ [1 Peter 1:18-19]. From his wounds indeed flow the sacraments... He paid dearly that men might everywhere have this office of preaching, baptizing, loosing, binding, giving the sacrament, comforting, warning, and exhorting with God’s word, and whatever else belongs to the pastoral office. For this office not only helps to further and sustain this temporal life and all the worldly estates, but it also gives eternal life and delivers from sin and death, which is its proper and chief work. *Indeed, it is only because of the spiritual estate that the world stands and abides at all; if it were not for this estate, the world would long since have gone down to destruction...* [The pastor is, therefore, a] special servant,...an angel of God, a true bishop before God, a savior of many people, a king and prince in the kingdom of Christ, a teacher of God’s people, a light of the world... There is no dearer treasure, no nobler thing on earth or in this life than a good and faithful pastor and preacher’ (*LW* 46:220-223)” (Prenter, *Luther the Reformer*, trans. John H. G. Rasmussen [Århus, Denmark: Aros Publishing, 1960], pp. 29-30).

²⁴ Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 82*, (1530) *LW* 13:65. Again, Luther writes, “It is dreadful when the conscience says: ‘You have done this without a call!’ Here a man without a call is shaken by such terror that he wishes he never heard the Word he preaches” (*Lectures on Galatians*, [1531] *LW* 26:20). Again, he writes, “Let this conviction remain unshaken: that everything must be done in accordance with God’s command, in order that we may determine with assurance in our conscience that we are doing it because we have been commanded by God. Hence those who run in a calling that pleases God do not run in vain or beat the air, as those do who have no course on which they have been commanded to run” (*Lectures on Genesis*, [1536] *LW* 2:114-115).

²⁵ CA 5

because the public minister is chosen from the midst of and for the benefit of the “assembly of saints and true believers” (i.e. the priesthood of all believers)²⁶ “in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly.”²⁷ All are equally priests, bishops and popes. The ministry is common to all. No one, therefore, may arrogate to himself on behalf of all to do that for which all have the same right and responsibility apart from the common consent and designation of all.²⁸

Thus while God is the author of the call to public ministry, he uses the assembly of believers, i.e., the congregation or its designated representative,²⁹ as the instrument by which he issues the call. This authority is by divine right and cannot be abrogated. Hence:

...wherever the church exists, the right to administer the Gospel exists. Wherefore it is necessary for the church to retain the right of calling, electing, and ordaining ministers... This right is a gift given exclusively to the church, and no human authority can take it away from the church.³⁰

We resist any attempt by church, state, or culture to relegate the ministry of word and sacraments to the merely private and “personal” sphere of existence.

We exclude the idea that every distinction between clergy and laity must be abolished for the sake of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers

any suggestion that there is legitimacy to the work of self-appointed ministers without a regular call.

any teaching that implies that the ministry belongs not to God himself but to the clergyperson or the congregation as a right or entitlement.

any attempt to deny that the authority to call ministers belongs to the congregation by divine right.

Partnership in the Ministry of Word and Sacraments

There is an inherent and dynamic tension between the ministry of the baptized and the public ministry, between that of the pastor and that of the laity in the congregation.³¹ Apart from the word of the cross this tension is mere

²⁶ CA 8 § 1.

²⁷ CA 7 § 1

²⁸ As Luther writes: “...of course it is not seemly that just anybody should exercise such office. Because we are all priests of equal standing, no one must push himself forward and take it upon himself, without our consent and election, to do that for which we all have equal authority. For no one dare take upon himself what is common to all without the authority and consent of the community” (LW 44:127-129).

²⁹ Regin Prenter writes: “The method by which the selection is made is not essential. It is not at all necessary that it be modeled after a democratic election [although it certainly may be]. A genuine selection by the church has its basis in the prior willingness of the congregation to receive as its pastor one, who after being properly examined, is found suitable for pastoral service, and its willingness to meet that one with the full openness and confidence that the office (!) demands” (Regin Prenter, “What is Missing in the Augsburg Confession”, p. 13).

³⁰ Tr. § 67 (BC, p. 321).

³¹ “Luther held neither a ‘theory of transference’— the derivation of the special, public ministry from the common priesthood of all believers, as represented by the congregation — nor the idea of a ‘holy priestly order’ as a superior spiritual estate instituted by God. He believed that there is *one* ‘ministry of the word,’ instituted by God and exercised by both common and special ministers in private and in public. Every Christian is a priest by virtue of baptism, which is the sacrament of ordination; and some Christians are ‘priests of priests’...by virtue of their calling into the public ministry of the word...Luther consistently kept his reflections on the two ministries in dialectical tension, avoiding the temptation of deriving the one from the other. Neither the promise of salvation in Christ, nor its communication through the ministry of the word, can be reduced to the political relationship between congregation and pastor, between ‘common’ and ‘special’ ministry. Both remain in creative tension with each other as organs of the one body of Christ in the world” (Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: the Theological Movement and its Confessional Writings* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976], p. 112). This description, of course, is applicable only as these “organs of the one body of Christ” are held together in mutual service to one another under the word of the cross. Apart from the word of cross, there is nothing *but* the “political relationship,” pitting “congregation” (i.e., laity alone) against pastor who is not considered part of the congregation proper.

divisiveness, competing interests struggling for rights and privileges, one side seeking self-justification over against the other (Galatians 5:15). Under the word of the cross, however, this tension is the very shape of the congregation's "partnership in the gospel" (Philippians 1:5) "...[in which] each [partner is] given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good... For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:7).

We find the shape of this partnership in the fourth chapter of Ephesians as well. The Apostle writes:

I...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all...But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift...And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God,... (Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13a).

The passage summarizes everything said thus far about God's institution of the ministry. It affirms that the call to the ministry is from the Triune God himself, "*one Spirit,...one Lord,...one God and Father of us all*" (vss. 4-6a) and belongs to all believers by virtue of their baptism: "*just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism etc. ...*" (vs. 4-5). Nevertheless, all are not given the same gifts nor called to the same tasks, for "*grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift...*" (vs. 7). Among Christ's gifts to his churches are that "*some (not all en masse!) should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers*" (vs. 11) to exercise the ministry publicly. Furthermore, this public ministry is exercised precisely "*to equip [all] the saints for the work of ministry*" (vs. 12), i.e., for the sake of and in service to the ministry and priesthood of all the baptized.

Thus the Apostle brings us full circle. All are divinely called to the ministry by baptism. Those who are to exercise that ministry publicly are called out of the midst of the whole congregation of believers and priests. The public ministry, in turn, exists for the equipping of the whole for *its* ministry—"for building up the body of Christ" (vs. 12).

Appropriately, the entire passage is set within the context of the Apostle's call for peace and unity, love and forbearance, within the one body of Christ (vss. 1-5, 13-16) all for the sake of ministry.³² The circle of the ministry is sealed by the word of the cross which is nothing less than Christ himself creating faith which is active in love and priestly service. Ultimately, true Christian unity has nothing to do with binding ecumenical "treaties" between denominations, but rather in the unshakeable bond of fellowship which the proclamation of the word and the administration of the sacraments creates in the body of Christ, the priesthood of all believers.³³

³² Cf. Article 5.03.11 of the Constitution of the Augsburg Lutheran District: *Organizational Principles*, Life Together vs. Guerilla Warfare—Our most important battle will be for the viability of our "life together" as a faith community (treating one another as brothers and sisters in Christ), and against the temptation to turn in upon ourselves, splitting into factions that use "guerilla warfare" tactics to "bite and devour one another" (Galatians 5:15).

³³ Significantly, it is this very passage from Ephesians that provides the scriptural basis for Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession ("On the Church"). The German text reads: "It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. *It is as Paul says in Ephesians 4:4, 5, 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism [The Latin text adds: "one God and Father of all," etc. (Ephesians 4:5, 6)]*". It is this intimate bond of fellowship and unity in the Spirit created by the word of the cross as it is proclaimed and believed from the pulpit and poured out, given, and received from the font and the altar that constitutes the church. Thus the church is defined in terms of the evangelical understanding of the ministry of word and sacraments not the ministry in terms of the church. The order is critical here. The word of the cross (i.e., the gospel of justification by faith alone, AC 4) demands proclamation through which the Holy Spirit creates faith (i.e., the office of the ministry, AC 5) active in love (i.e., the new obedience, AC 6) and gathers the assembly of all believers (i.e., the church or Christian congregation which always includes both proclaimer and hearers, pastor and laity, AC 7). To reverse the order, proceeding from a theory about the nature of the church (ecclesiology) to a definition of the ministry, will inevitably result in compromising the gospel. This is true regardless of whether one begins with a hierarchical understanding of the church in which sacramentally ordained bishops in historic succession become collectively and "collegially" the "true" church and thus its gatekeepers and dispensers of God's grace, or beginning with an egalitarian understanding in which autonomous congregations, who are the "true" church all by themselves, consider the minister either their dispensable "hired hand," who must please the majority in order not to be fired, or make of

This is particularly and most beautifully seen and experienced in the intimate partnership in the gospel between those who are called in a specific place to the ministry of *all* the baptized and the one called to the *public* ministry in their midst. In this partnership, created and sustained by the word of the cross, there is no contradiction or conflict between proclaimer and hearers, clergy and laity, pastor and congregation. They are one. As Regin Prenter expresses it:

The word of God which creates faith in human beings does not come through an institutional office whose origin and activity is in principle independent of “the congregation” (i.e., its lay members, which it virtually must see as objects over which to exercise influence). Rather, the word of God and faith are joined together, becoming one in the congregation, so that the word of God is never found apart from the congregation [(which always includes the one called publicly to proclaim the word)] and the congregation is never apart from the word of God. For this reason the public ministry of Word and sacraments lives in and with the people of God as one of the manifestations of its corporate life.³⁴

In his struggle to find words adequately to express the depths of this partnership the Apostle grasps for the closest and most intimate of human relationships, that of husband and wife becoming one flesh in the marriage bed. The partnership of word and faith, hearer and teller, proclaimer and community, pastor and laity created by the ministry of word and sacraments is just that kind of union—only deeper and more intimate. This is true because hidden in, with, and under every act of ministry is the real presence of the living Christ who “loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). Thus the Apostle can dare to say: “...a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying it refers to Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:31-32). As Luther states, the faith obtained by the ministry of word and sacraments

...unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh. And there is between them a true marriage—indeed the most perfect of all marriages, since human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage—it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own...Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ’s, while grace, life and salvation will be the soul’s; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride’s and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?

...Thus the believing soul...is free in Christ its bridegroom, free from all sins, secure against death and hell, and is endowed with the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of Christ its bridegroom. So he takes to himself a glorious bride, “without spot or wrinkle, cleansing her by

him or her a personality cult and congregational idol. In either case the living voice of the gospel freely given to the sinner by a gracious God is lost. Christ is removed from the throne and the church put in his place. A better definition of Antichrist cannot be found. It is precisely to avoid such tyranny and apostasy that Article 7, cited above, makes the proclamation of the gospel (“preached in its purity”) and the sacraments (“administered according to the Gospel”) the sole criterion for the unity of the church. Everything else is dispensable. “It is not necessary...that ceremonies [the Latin reads: “human traditions or rites and ceremonies” encompassing polity as well as ritual], instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places.” Article 7 was written, so to speak, as a perpetual dethronement of the church so that the Crucified One, even now hidden in lowliness under human words and humble elements, proclaimed by sinful human beings and through corrupt structures, might reign. As Mary sang, “he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree” (Luke 1:51b-52). The sum and substance of the principles of Christian freedom and order with respect to the ministry of word and sacraments, therefore, is this: “Just as we are all free in Christ (cf. Galatians 5:1), so too we are free to use whatever structures, [rites, and ceremonies] further the proclamation of the Word of the cross...For the sake of good order (1 Corinthians 14:40) and mission a variety of public structures for proclamation has developed (Ap 14 § 1), but already in the New Testament the variety of such structures demonstrates that no particular structure was normative. The Lord is free to use many kinds of structures for his mission.” (Our Declaration 5.5 “Mission and Church: God’s Action in this World.” See the entire section.). All such things have their place. However, they must be kept in their place. They must be carefully ordered (i.e. “kept on a leash”) so that they remain servants and do not become lords. “We are not free to surrender our freedom by establishing structures which are held to safeguard the gospel from the brokenness of this world” (Ibid.).

³⁴ Regin Prenter, “What is Missing in the Augsburg Confession”, p. 7.

the washing of water with the word” [Ephesians 5:26-27] of life, righteousness, and salvation. In this way he marries her in faith, steadfast love, and in mercies, righteousness, and justice, as Hosea 2 [:19-20] says.

Who then can fully appreciate what this royal marriage means?...Here the rich and divine bridegroom Christ marries this poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all evil, and adorns her with all his goodness. Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him. And she has that righteousness in Christ, her husband, of which she may boast as of her own and which she can confidently display alongside her sins in the face of death and hell and say, “If I have sinned, yet my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned, and all his is mine and all mine is his,” as the bride in the Song of Solomon [2:16] says, “My beloved is mine and I am his.”³⁵

Finally the ministry of word and sacraments is nothing less than the very union of Christ the true bridegroom with his bride.

We exclude the view that the authority of the public ministry is from the priesthood of all believers as delegated or “transferred” from the congregation so that the public minister is merely the representative of the congregation’s interests rather than the servant of the word of God in the congregation’s midst.

imposing the public ministry as an institutional office that stands over the congregation and whose origin and activity is in principle independent of “the congregation” (i.e., its lay members, which it virtually must see as objects over which to exercise influence).

the idea that true Christian unity is to be found anywhere other than in the unshakeable bond of fellowship in the assembly of believers and saints gathered around the gospel purely proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered (e.g., in binding ecumenical “treaties” between denominations).

³⁵ Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:333.