

THE LUTHERAN DOCTRINE OF THE MINISTRY: CATHOLIC AND REFORMED

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THIS ARTICLE is encyclopedic, not in the sense that it covers the universe from A to Z, but rather because it seeks to give a condensed yet comprehensive and reliable account of its subject. It argues no over-all thesis, but does contain a multiplicity of minor ones which reflect with reasonable faithfulness, I hope, the present state of scholarship in this area. The general impression which emerges is that while the structure of the Lutheran understanding of the ministry is very different from the traditional Roman Catholic one, there are few, perhaps no, points of irreducible conflict. Yet my purpose is not to insist on this conclusion. Those who are not persuaded will find here, I hope, the data needed for responsible disagreement.

In the three sections which follow I deal with the Lutheran doctrine of the ministry, first, in its official traditional form, second, in the light of contemporary developments, and third, in relation to current Catholic thought.

THE OFFICIAL DOCTRINE

The ecclesiastically most authoritative statements of the Lutheran doctrine of the ministry are to be found in the Symbolical Books, especially in the *Confessio Augustana*.¹ It is to these, therefore, that we shall chiefly refer in this section. Luther's discussions of the topic are, it is true, more influential in some circles than are the confessional

¹The Symbolical Books or confessional writings of the Lutheran Church are assembled in "The Book of Concord," critically edited in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen, 1956) by Hans Lietzmann, Heinrich Bornkamm, Hans Volz, and Ernst Wolf. The standard English translation is Theodore G. Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia, 1959). In the following notes I shall refer to the first as *Bekenntnisschriften* and the second as "Tappert."—In both texts and notes I use the standard abbreviations for the various documents: The Augsburg Confession or *Confessio Augustana* (CA), The Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Ap.), The Smalcald Articles (SA), The Treatise or *Tractatus* on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (*Tr.*), The Large Catechism (LC), The Epitome of the Formula of Concord (*Ep.*), and the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord (SD). Luther's writings are cited from the *Weimar Ausgabe* (WA).—The most notable texts referring to the ministry are CA V, XIV, XXVIII; Ap. XIII, XIV, XXVIII; SA II, 4, and III, 9, 10; and *Tr. passim*. For many of my references I am indebted to an unpublished paper by Prof. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "The Sacred Ministry and Holy Ordination in the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church." It should be noted that most of the confessional writings were originally composed in both German and Latin official versions, which are therefore both authoritative expressions of the Lutheran position.

writings; but they are so varied, and their proper interpretation is so much debated, that in a brief paper such as this it is impossible to deal with them responsibly. I shall therefore mention them only at a few points, even though this is to risk giving what many people would regard as an incomplete account of the Lutheran position.

Summary

- I. A. From the three premises that (1) justification is *sola fide*, (2) faith comes by means of the "external" Word in preaching and the sacraments, and (3) the office of the *ministerium verbi* is therefore necessary,
- B. four conclusions follow: (1) the *ministerium verbi* is *de iure divino*, but (2) only so far as it in truth serves the Word; (3) it alone is *de iure divino*; (4) other ministries are important to the extent that they also (indirectly) serve the Word.
- II. (Explication of the first of the above conclusions: The office is divinely instituted.)

Excursus 1: This is a "vertical" institution through the continuously operative divine command, rather than a "horizontal" institution through the historical succession.

Corollaries:

1. The office, however, should be publicly institutionalized.
2. Its powers are *de iure divino* to the extent that it serves the Word.
3. The Church therefore has the obligation
 - (a) to obey office holders,
 - (b) to fill the office with suitable men, and
 - (c) to watch over the faithfulness to the Word of the office holders.

Excursus 2: The priesthood of all believers and the ascription of the same "powers" to laymen as the clergy protect against erroneous views of the office, but are not the basis or part of the positive content of the ministry. This is founded on the need for a special office with special functions.

4. The ministry and ordination are sacramental.
 - (a) Ordination is not an adiaphoron.
 - (b) It is normally not repeated.

Development

First, a terminological clarification is necessary. When the Confessions speak of "ministry" (*ministerium*, *Amt*, etc.), they do not refer, con-

trary to such a view as Rudolph Sohm's, to "that office which is 'common property of all Christians,' namely, the 'ministerial office' that is inherent in the universal priesthood of every believer," and which is exercised whenever any Christian proclaims or witnesses to the gospel in any way whatsoever.² The writers of the Confessions do not have such an "invisible" office in mind, but rather think of a public office involving particular rights and duties to be exercised only or chiefly by the limited number of individuals who are formally inducted into it (CA XIV).³

Their view of this office is shaped by the two doctrines of justification *sola fide* and of the Word as the means of faith. Article IV of the *Confessio Augustana* asserts the overwhelming and exclusive importance of faith as the one thing needed for justification.⁴ Then Article V raises the question of how this faith is obtained, and gives the answer that the "external Word" present in preaching and the sacraments is the means or instrument through which the Holy Spirit works faith.⁵ These two doctrines are the fundamental premises of the doctrine of the public office of the ministry understood as centering on the proclamation of the Word through preaching and sacraments.

Logically, however, a third premise is also operative, even though it is assumed rather than expressed. It is assumed that this *ministerium verbi* is necessary. Preaching and sacraments require an office. No particular view of why it is necessary is made binding either here or elsewhere in the Confessions. The theologian is left free to argue for the office in various ways. He can do so on the basis of the sociological—or, if you wish, "Pauline"—principle that decency and order require in any large and enduring community the institutionalization of roles (i.e., offices), or he can appeal to the logical impossibility of having regular, public community-building activities such as the liturgies of

²Rudolph Sohm, *Kirchenrecht 2* (Leipzig, 1923) 140 ff. The references in the text are taken from Edmund Schlink, *The Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia, 1961) p. 245, n. 14.

³"De ordine ecclesiastico docent quod nemo debeat in ecclesia publice docere aut sacramenta administrare nisi rite vocatus" (*Bekennnisschriften*, p. 69).

⁴"...homines non possent iustificari coram Deo propriis viribus, meritis aut operibus, sed gratis iustificentur propter Christum per fidem..." (*ibid.*, p. 56).

⁵"Ut hanc fidem consequamur, institutum est ministerium docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta. Nam per verbum et sacramenta tamquam per instrumenta donatur spiritus sanctus, qui fidem efficit. ...Damnant Anabaptistas et alios, qui sentiunt spiritum sanctum contingere hominibus sine verbo externo per ipsorum praeparationes et opera" (*ibid.*, p. 58). It will be observed that here, as elsewhere in the confessional writings, the "external Word" takes the two forms of preaching or teaching and the sacraments. Unless the context clearly indicates otherwise, the "ministry of the Word" or *Predigtamt* in what follows includes the administration of the sacraments.

Word and sacrament without communally recognized (i.e., official) leaders, or he can even argue from the divine institution of the ministry to its necessity. In short, *why* the ministerial office is necessary for preaching and sacraments is left open, but *that* it is necessary is an unquestioned premise.

From these three premises the Lutheran doctrine of the ministry follows. It may be summed up in four conclusions. First, the *ministerium verbi* is *de iure divino*. Second, all ministries or aspects of the ministry which hinder or are contrary to the *ministerium verbi* are to be rejected. Third, the *ministerium verbi* is the *only* essential, the *only de iure divino*, ministry in the church. Fourth, ministerial offices other than preaching and sacramental administration are important to the degree that they also, even though indirectly, serve the Word.

Positively considered, it is the affirmation of the *de iure divino* character of the ministerial office which is of overwhelming importance, and we shall spend most of our time in this doctrinal section trying to unravel its implications for topics as diverse as apostolic succession, the constitution of the church, and the question of ordination. Before doing this, however, it will be well to say something of the last three conclusions.

The second and third in particular have been of major importance in the polemics against Roman Catholics and are generally cited as the characteristic marks of the Reformation position. Both of them clearly stem from the *sola fide*. Because faith is essential, what is opposed to the ministry of the means of faith must be rejected (second conclusion). Because *only* faith is essential, only this ministry of the means of faith is *de iure divino* (third conclusion). Thus the second conclusion is held to justify the Lutheran break with the historic institutional structures of the church, and the third is the ground for the Lutheran position that church policy is an adiaphoron which allows for vast variations, such as those within Lutheranism, between state and free churches, and between episcopal and congregational-presbyterial ecclesiastical constitutions. The *ministerium verbi* is the *nota ecclesiae* (Ap. VII, 20, German).⁶ On analogy with the "satis est" of CA VII,⁷ one can say that this is the one office indispensable for the true unity of the church.

The fourth conclusion is theologically and doctrinally fully as necessary as the others, but it has been relatively neglected. When taken

⁶ "Die rechte Kirche . . . [hat] diese äusserliche Zeichen: das Predigtamt oder Evangelium und die Sakrament." The Latin in this context speaks simply of the "notas: puram doctrinam evangelii et sacramenta" (*ibid.*, p. 238).

⁷ "Et ad veram unitatem ecclesiae satis est consentire de doctrina evangelii et de administratione sacramentorum" (*ibid.*, p. 61).

seriously, it restricts the adiaphoristic use which Lutherans have made of the third conclusion. Some ministries which are not directly ministries of the Word may, even though not indispensable, be of great importance to the church because of their indirect contributions to the *ministerium verbi*. It is for this reason that the confessional writers are willing to acknowledge that a reformed episcopacy⁸ or even papacy⁹ might under some circumstances be acceptable. It is also for this reason that many Lutherans are now opposed on theological grounds to the kind of state church in which the prince is the *summus episcopus*. They would argue that it is *theologically* important, though not *de iure divino*, for the church to have supervisory offices (whether episcopal or nonepiscopal), and for these to be under its own control. They would like to go beyond the Confessions and (to use a distinction popularized by Anglicans) develop a doctrine, not only of the *esse* of the church's institutional structure, but also of its *bene esse*. This is certainly not excluded by the Confessions, despite the tendency of many Lutherans to suppose that it is. Actually the reverse is the case. As this fourth conclusion states, the Lutheran doctrine of the paramountcy of the Word demands that ecclesiastical polity in its entirety be tested and controlled by a theological consideration of its service of the Word. From the point of view of Lutheran confessional principles, questions of, e.g., the supervisory function ought not be left as completely to historical accident and prudential considerations as has often happened in Lutheran churches.

After these few comments regarding the confessional doctrine of the relation of the ministry of the Word to other ecclesiastical offices, we must turn to what the confessional writers regard as the heart of the matter, the ministry of the Word itself. We shall first consider the reasons for saying that this office is *de iure divino* (which raises the question of apostolic succession), and then deal with the various corollaries.

According to CA V, the ministry is instituted by God,¹⁰ it is *de iure divino*. Lutherans differ in their understanding of the basis for this confessional emphasis. The majority opinion—to deal with that first—is that it has nothing to do with any kind of historic succession in office. It

⁸Ap. XIV; SA III, 10.

⁹Actually the only place in which this concession is made in the confessional writings is in a note which Philip Melancthon appended to his signature of the Smalcald Articles: "De pontifice autem statuo, si evangelium admitteret, posse ei propter pacem et communem tranquillitatem christianorum, qui jam sub ipso sunt et in posterum sub ipso erunt, superioritatem in episcopos, quam alioqui habet jure humano, etiam a nobis per-mitti" (*ibid.*, pp. 463-64).

¹⁰"Solchen Glauben zu erlangen, hat Gott das Predigtamt eingesetzt..." (*ibid.*, p. 58). Cf. the Latin version cited n. 5 above.

is rather rooted entirely in the doctrines of justification and of the Word. In willing that men receive justifying faith (premise 1) through preaching and the sacraments (premise 2), God necessarily also wills what is essential to these activities, and this (according to premise 3) includes the *ministerium verbi*. This certainly seems to be the implicit argument of CA IV and V; for these articles, like most other relevant passages, make no reference to the apostolic office. They appear to agree that Christ's continuously operative command to preach and celebrate the sacraments involves a continuously operative injunction to establish the ministry. Consequently this ministry, as long as it truly serves the Word, is *de iure divino* even when succession in office is interrupted. To be sure, this does not legitimate needless breaks in continuity, for to establish a new ecclesiastical order in culpable contravention of God's will to unity would be to disobey rather than obey His command. For this reason, the Confessions express a desire to maintain the traditional episcopal order of the church where this is possible (*Ap. XIV; SA III, 10*), as Lutherans indeed have done in places such as Scandinavia. Yet nothing crucial hinges on this continuity: "Wherefore, when the bishops are heretics or refuse to administer ordination, the churches are by divine right compelled to ordain pastors and ministers for themselves, using their own pastors for this purpose" (*Tr. 72*).

Some "high-church" Lutherans, however, make central for their interpretation certain other passages, chiefly CA XXVIII, which link the ministry to the commissioning of the apostles by Christ: "the power of the keys or the power of bishops (i.e., ministers) is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments. For Christ sent out the apostles with this command, 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you...'"¹¹ This can be viewed as favoring institutional (and not simply doctrinal) continuity with the apostles' ministry, particularly when conjoined with the confessional writers' insistence that the ministries of their churches are *de facto* within the historic succession. "Since the distinction between bishop and pastor is not by divine right, it is manifest that ordination administered by a pastor in his own church is valid by divine right" (*Tr. 65*). In other words, because of the fundamental unity of the ministerial office, there is no theological difference between episcopal and presbyterial orders.¹² Thus, from the point of view of the Confessions, Lutheran presbyterial ministries are as genu-

¹¹Tappert, pp. 81-82. Jürgen Roloff, "The Question of the Church's Ministry in Our Generation," *Lutheran World* 11 (1964) 402, has pointed out the centrality of this text for the high-church interpretation of the confessions.

¹²Cf. *Tr. 74, 11 and 23.*

inely within the apostolic succession as are episcopal ones. This should be recognized even by the "papists . . . according to their own laws, for their laws state that those who are ordained by heretics shall also be regarded as ordained and remain so. St. Jerome, too, wrote concerning the church in Alexandria that it was originally governed without bishops by priests and preachers in common" (SA III, 10). On the basis of such texts it can be argued that the Confessions permit, even if they do not affirm, the view that orders which lack both episcopal and presbyterial succession are *ipso facto* defective and that the *de iure divino* character of the ministry is in part dependent on the historic transmission of the office from apostolic origins.

I, like most Lutherans, am not persuaded by this interpretation. To be sure, it is not excluded by the actual words of the confessional writers, for they never expressly state that a church lacking even presbyters can ordain new ministers. Nevertheless, it is inconceivable that they would not have affirmed this if they had been confronted with a situation in which all the pastors, and not only the bishops, were in their view "enemies of the gospel." Here also would apply the words "The Church must not be deprived of ministers on their account" (SA III, 10). The church must, if need be, establish an entirely discontinuous ministerial order, and this would be *de iure divino* in the full sense simply and entirely because of its service of the Word, not at all because of any historical succession in the transmission of office. To be sure, as we have already twice mentioned, such a succession might be conditionally desirable because of its indirect service of the Word.

We come now to the corollaries of the *de iure divino* character of the ministerial office.

In the first place, this view excludes anti-institutional concepts of the church. CA V bases its rejection of the Anabaptist neglect of the external Word on the fact that the *ministerium verbi* (the office, not simply the activities of preaching and celebrating the sacraments) is instituted by God.¹³ CA XIV clarifies this further by prohibiting purely charismatic ministries of public preaching, teaching, and sacramental administration. It affirms that there should be a "regular call," that the ministry should be institutionalized.¹⁴ This, therefore, also excludes certain modern views such as the famous thesis of R. Sohm that the public ministry, even if perhaps sociologically and historically inevitable, is a "worldly office," a part of "the external order of visible Christendom," and therefore part of the world rather than the church.¹⁵

¹³ Cf. n. 10 above.

¹⁴ Cf. n. 3 above.

¹⁵ Cf. n. 2 above.

If the views of Bultmann and some of his associates lead to similar results, as they appear to do, then these also are rejected.

The second corollary would appear to be analytically derivable from the first. Because the office is instituted by God, its authority or *potes-tas* also comes from God, not from the person of office holder, nor (even though the Confessions do not specifically state this) from the congregation. When ministers "offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they do so in Christ's place and stead. . . . For they do not represent their own persons but the person of Christ, because of the church's call, as Christ testifies (Luke 10:16), 'He who hears you hears me'" (Ap. VII, 28; cf. CA VIII).

The Confessions draw an anti-Donatist conclusion from this. The unworthiness of ministers does not rob preaching or administration of sacraments "of their efficacy" (*ibid.*). In the second place, it would appear that this excludes the nineteenth-century collegial "transference" theory (*Übertragungstheorie*) according to which the ministerial office and its powers are derived by delegation from the congregation (which is the original and immediate subject of the office), with the consequence that the minister is said to "represent" the congregation.¹⁶ The rejection of this view has, obviously, important practical consequences. Because the minister speaks *in persona Christi*, he has the duty to stand when necessary against majority congregational opinion. In such situations as, for example, Nazi Germany or segregationist America, he cannot protest simply as one individual Christian among others, but must speak as the public, official spokesman for God and the church.

An excursus is necessary at this point. The Confessions, as far as I know, never speak of the minister as "representing" the congregation, but it may be assumed that they are open to the affirmation that he also does this in some of his roles, especially that of president of the Eucharistic assembly. Thus Luther says: "Und lassen unsern Pfarrer nicht für sich, als für seine personen, die ordnung Christi sprechen, Sondern der ist unser aller mund and wir alle sprechen sie mit jm von hertzen und mit auffgerichtetem glauben zu dem Lam Gottes, das da für uns und bey uns ist and seiner ordnung nach uns speiset mit seinem leibe and blut."¹⁷ In this situation the priest acts "in the person of" both Christ and the congregation. R. Prenter (to whom I am indebted for the above citation from Luther) explains the point this way:

Christ entertains the Father, in the place of the priest and the congregation, to

¹⁶ Schlink, *op. cit.*, pp. 244-46.

¹⁷ "Von der Winkelmesse und Pfaffenweihe" (WA 38, 247).

fulfil His promises. Therefore the priest in the Supper service is not the representative of Christ over against the congregation, but the representative of the congregation before Christ, when he (and the congregation together with him) "lays on Christ" the prayers and gifts of the congregation, and so brings them before God. One could call this priestly "representation of the congregation" a passive representation of Christ, in distinction from the active representation which is the royal service of the apostles. . . .¹⁸

In speaking of the *potestas* which ministers exercise *de iure divino*, the Lutheran Confessions enumerate under the *potestas ordinis* preaching and the administration of the sacraments. The *potestas jurisdictionis* includes reconciling sinners and excommunication (*Ap.* XXVII, 13; cf. *CA* XXVIII, 5; *SA* III, 9; *Tr.* 60). Ministers also have by divine right the magisterial responsibility "to judge doctrine and condemn doctrine which is contrary to the Gospel" (*CA* XXVIII, 21). The *ministerium verbi* also includes the pastoral function of leading and governing the church: "Christ bids Peter to pasture the sheep, that is, to preach the Word or govern the church with the Word" (*Tr.* 30; cf. *SD* X, 10; *LC*, Ten Commandments 158). Included in this function is the *licentia* to "make regulations so that everything in the churches is done in good order" (*CA* XXVIII, 53). To be sure, these regulations (Sunday observance and women covering their head are mentioned as examples) are not themselves *jus divinum*. They are not "necessary services of God," and it is not "a sin to omit their observance" (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, the power to make rules in the service of the Word belongs to the ministerial office *de iure divino*, and "it is proper for the Christian assembly to keep such ordinances for the sake of love and peace" (*ibid.* 55).

While every minister of the Word is *de iure divino* equal to every other minister of the Word (*Tr.* 63; cf. *ibid.* 8 f.), this does not imply a congregationalist polity in which each minister (together with his congregation) is empowered to act independently of all others. The ministry is an *ordo* or *Stand* in the church (*Ap.* XIII, 11-12; XXII, 13; XXVIII, 13; *SA* III, 11, 1) and can therefore be understood as a *collegium* which may be organized *de iure humano* in a variety of ways. While the Confessions do not explicitly speak of collegiality, they assume it *de facto*. The *Confessio Augustana* presupposes the legitimacy of the historic structures in which the individual churches are gathered together in larger groupings under bishops who are themselves ministers of the Word and whom parish ministers and churches are bound *de iure divino* to obey as long as they command nothing contrary to the gospel (*CA* XXVIII, 22-23). Further, the *Tractatus* assumes that synods or councils constitute the proper instrument for the church to exercise its "power

¹⁸ *Oecumenica* 1967, eds. F. W. Kantzenbach and V. Vajta (Minneapolis, 1967) p. 276.

of making judgments and decisions according to the Word of God" (*Tr.* 55-56).

We come now to a third corollary, which is the converse of the *de iure divino* existence and authority of the office. The church has the *de iure divino* obligation to obey ministers, but it is also superior to the ministers (*Tr.* 11). Thus, in discussing the obligation to obey, we must also discuss the way in which it is limited by the rights and powers of the church at large over against the office holders.

"Church" in this connection refers to local congregations taken both singly and collectively. Because of their historical situation, the confessional writers do not make this point explicitly, but they nevertheless affirm it as emphatically as could be desired. Word and sacraments are all that is necessary for the existence of the church (*CA VII* and *Ap.* VII, 20), but the church so identified is precisely what is meant by the worshiping assembly or local congregation. Further, the church is always spoken of as comprising both clergy and laity (*LC*, Decalogue, 262, Introduction 3; *SC*, Introduction 6, Table of Duties 2-3; *Ep.*, Summary Concept 5; *SD*, Summary Concept 8, X, 10; *Ap.* XXII, 1, 2, 4; *Tr.* 11). Nowhere do the Confessions envision the hypothetical case of communities of believers entirely deprived of regular ministers.

Now the fundamental power of the churches or congregations (acting singly or more normally together) in reference to the ministry is that of inducting by divine command (*Ap.* 13, 12) suitable men into the office. Once inducted, the pastor "stands over against the congregation as God's representative in God's commission,"¹⁹ but it is through the public appointment of the church that he receives this commission. The authority to make such appointments inheres in the church as a whole rather than in any particular group within the church. "For wherever the church exists, the right to administer the Gospel also exists. Wherefore it is necessary for the church to retain the right of calling, electing, and ordaining ministers" (*Tr.* 67). No particular arrangements for doing this are *de iure divino*, however, and the Confessions say that the existing bishops, if "they are concerned about the church and the Gospel... might be permitted (for the sake of love and unity, but not of necessity) to ordain and confirm us and our preachers" (*SA III*, 10). At the other extreme, as we have already argued, lay people without any clerical participation can in cases of necessity call and ordain into the ministry. The principles of the sovereignty of the Word and the necessity of the office demand this. This possibility, to be sure, is not clearly asserted by the confessional writers, but presumably this is because they were not confronted with emergencies which would require it.

¹⁹ Schlink, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

In the second place, the churches or congregations have the right and duty to exercise a supervisory function over the ministry. This is implied by the second conclusion, stated towards the beginning of this paper, that Christians, because of their primary allegiance to the Word, must refuse obedience when their ministers teach or command what is contrary to the gospel, and they are at liberty to disregard regulations which are *adiaphora* "when no offense is given to others" (CA XXVIII, 56).

All Christians share in this responsibility of testing the spirits and watching over sound doctrine. This is the basis for the appeal to the princes "as the chief members of the church . . . to see to it that errors are removed" (*Tr.* 54). Although the Confessions make no proposals, their principles presumably imply that institutionalized participation in the *Wächteramt* is desirable as long as the primary official authority remains with the *ministerium*. Such institutionalization has indeed occurred in some Lutheran churches, although not to the same degree as in the Reformed.

Nevertheless, lay rights of opposition or control are severely restricted by the *de iure divino* character of the office. No matter how grave the practical or moral failures and misdeeds of the ministry and ministers in carrying out their proper functions, they ought not be resisted in irregular or extracanonial ways unless they are guilty of actual heresy and there is no other recourse. Efforts at reform must, when possible, follow the path of "due process" rather than ecclesiastical disobedience.

Little more is said by the Lutheran Symbolical Books regarding the rights of the congregation over against the office, or of the laity over against the clergy. The possibility of laymen baptizing or giving absolution in emergencies is only once mentioned (*Tr.* 67), and the practice of Lutherans in the Reformation period (as well as later) was to forbid lay celebration of the Eucharist even in emergencies.²⁰ The reason for this restriction is that the Eucharist, unlike baptism and absolution, is not indispensable for the individual.

We have so far said nothing of the priesthood of all believers or of the related thesis that all Christians through baptism have all the inherent powers of priests. These are widely thought to be fundamental to the Lutheran doctrine of the ministry, but the Confessions never refer to them either as a basis or restriction of the ministerial office. Only once is the text on the royal priesthood (1 Pt 2:9) cited, and then only as proof that the church, "since it alone possesses the priesthood, certainly has the right of electing and ordaining ministers" (*Tr.* 69). This

²⁰ WA, *Briefe* VII, 338-39, 365-66; WA, *Tischreden* V, 621, no. 6361.

reticence may owe something both to the polemic against the Anabaptists and to the desire to be irenic towards the Catholics, but it is also possible to suggest that the doctrine of the universal priesthood is not in fact helpful in understanding the special ministry, especially when this is understood as primarily service of the Word. The universal priesthood, because it is common to the whole people of God, cannot be used to explain what differentiates one ministry from another in the church. To emphasize it in this context is to minimize the proprium of the office and to view the members of the church as having homogeneous rather than diverse ministries. Further, it leads to transference theories which tend to make ministers servants of the church rather than the gospel. To be sure, as we shall later observe at greater length, the *ministerium verbi* is of immense importance in actualizing the character of the church as the royal priesthood (i.e., the priestly worshiping community which royally proclaims the gospel), but this is to say that it is instrumental to this general priesthood rather than derivable from it.

The related thesis that all baptized believers have the same powers as priests (or ministers) is, as far as I can see, even less relevant to an understanding of the positive content of the Reformation doctrine of the ministry. It was originally formulated as a denial of medieval Catholic views of special infused sacramental powers and an indelible character "imprinted on the soul" of the priest, but apart from a knowledge of what it denies, it is virtually meaningless. The Reformers did not deny that ministers exercise what are ordinarily called "special powers" distinct *de iure divino* from those normally exercised by laymen, but they insist on understanding these simply as the special functions of the office rather than as ontologically inherent in the office holders, and, as we shall see, they are also at least open to the possibility that the commissioning to the office is permanent, which would seem to be the functional equivalent of the "indelible character." As a consequence, when Roman Catholic theologians, as some of them now appear to be doing, interpret the special powers and indelible character of the priesthood in functional-ecclesial terms related to the office of the *ministerium verbi* rather than in impersonal-ontological-individualistic concepts, it is not at all clear that in reference to this particular matter they disagree with the Reformers.²¹ (To be sure, they may add powers or func-

²¹ Examples of the kind of Roman Catholic thinking to which I refer are provided by Joseph Ratzinger, "Das geistliche Amt und die Einheit der Kirche," in J. C. Hampe (ed.), *Die Autorität der Freiheit* 2 (Munich, 1967) 417-33; Karl Rahner, "Priesterliche Existenz," *Schriften zur Theologie* 3 (Einsiedeln, 1962) 285-312; Eliseo Ruffini, "Character as a Concrete Manifestation of the Sacrament in Relation to the Church," *Concilium* 38 (New York, 1968) 101-14.

tions to the office which a Protestant rejects, but that is another question.)

After this glance at the relation of the *ministerium verbi* to the laity and the church, we come to the fourth corollary of the *de iure divino* character of the office. Ordination into the office and the office itself can be called a "sacrament."

"If *ordo* is interpreted in relation to the ministry of the Word, we have no objection to calling it a sacrament," because "it is commanded by God and has great promises attached to it." The rite of laying on of hands can also be termed a sacrament in view of the fact that "the Church has the command to appoint ministers, to this we must subscribe wholeheartedly, for we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it" (*Ap. XIII*, 11-12).

To be sure, the ministry and ordination should not be placed on the same level as the "three sacraments of salvation," baptism, the Lord's Supper, and absolution (*ibid.* 3-4). Sacraments in the strict sense are (a) rites "which have the command of God," (b) "to which the promise of grace has been added," and in which (c) the grace conferred is that of the "New Testament," i.e., "salvation" or "the forgiveness of sins" (*ibid.* 3, 4, and 14). In the case of the ministry the last condition is lacking. Grace is given the minister, in the words of Luther, "nicht für sich selbs noch für seine Person, Sondern für das Ampt."²² It is, therefore, only in a broader or secondary sense that the ministry is sacramental.

To be sure, there are many passages in Luther, especially from the early reformatory period, which seem wholly opposed to a sacramental understanding of the ministry and of ordination; but these are always directed against the rite as it had come to be practiced, not against the "apostolic rite" of the laying on of hands.²³ Further, it is clear that Luther held that induction into the ministry involves a blessing²⁴ and a gift of grace, of the Holy Spirit, to the minister for the exercise of his office which is so thoroughly "objective" that heretical ordinations are valid and this gift of the Spirit works judgment on the unfaithful office holder.²⁵ His frequent attacks on the notion that ordination confers grace refer to the grace of personal justification and sanctification, not to the grace of office. A failure to note this distinction has led even some recent investigators to suppose that Luther did not recognize an *Amtscharisma*.²⁶

It has been held by some Lutherans that ordination as an act or rite

²² WA 28, 468.

²³ See H. Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination bei Luther und Melanchthon* (Göttingen, 1962) pp. 229 ff.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 214 ff. ²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 223 ff.

²⁶ E.g., W. Brunotte, *Das geistliche Amt bei Luther* (Berlin, 1959) pp. 188 ff.

distinct from *vocatio* or *electio* is an adiaphoron, but this position was repudiated in reference to the case of John Freder by a Pomerian synod (1556) with the concurrence of Melanchthon and the Wittenberg faculty.²⁷ The Symbolical Books, composed largely before the controversy, do not always make this point clear. Thus CA XIV says only that ministers must (*debeat/soll*) be *rite vocatus*, but there is every reason to believe that this simply reflects the usage of that period in which *vocatio* and *ordinatio* were often used interchangeably to refer to the whole procedure of electing, calling, and ordaining into the ministry.²⁸ Further, whatever the variations in theological opinion, the unvarying and universal liturgical and canonical practice of the Lutheran churches has been to insist on ordination as an essential condition for entrance into the ministry.

Reordination of ministers who have laicized or apostatized was not an issue at the time of the Reformation, and the Confessions are silent on the subject.⁴ In the literature I have consulted, there are no clear-cut reports of this ever happening in sixteenth-century Lutheran churches, and while I have not investigated later periods, my impression is that it has always been either extremely rare or entirely lacking. In practice, Lutherans have acted as if they believed in the operational equivalent of the *character indelebilis*. The commissioning to the *ministerium verbi* is in principle lifelong, and so it remains in effect even when a man fails to perform the functions to which he has been called and ordained.

Theological opinion on this point has, however, varied widely. To this day in America, for example, it is often said by Lutheran clergymen that a thoroughly functional understanding of the ministry as the service of Word means that a man who leaves the pastorate (whether through retirement, or for secular work, or even for church administration) becomes, theologically speaking, in every respect indistinguishable from a layman. This logically implies that he should be reordained if he once again accepts a call to a pastorate (even though this is never done, for there are no provisions for it in the church law of any Lutheran body).

Now it is true that Luther, in the early period, did say that a man who has once been made a priest can become a layman again, "since he differs in no wise from a layman except by his ministerial office."²⁹ However, as we have already suggested, this must be understood as a polemic against the ontologically conceived indelible character, not as a denial of the "unrepealability" of the commission and the associated

²⁷ Lieberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 360-71.

²⁸ Piepkorn makes this point in the unpublished paper referred to in n. 1 above.

²⁹ WA 6, 408.

blessing.³⁰ Further, the widespread opinion that Luther at one time approved reordination for those re-entering the office or taking up a new charge has been shown to be an inference for which definite evidence is lacking.³¹

Obviously, the chief difficulty with reordination or with the idea that a nonfunctioning minister is totally identical with a layman is that this ignores the public and official character of the ministry and of induction into it. By the very nature of the case, a public appointment, whether in church or civil society, cannot be unilaterally abrogated by the one who has accepted the appointment except to the extent that the appointing body agrees.

This still leaves open the possibility, however, that commissioning to the *ministerium verbi* in the full sense could on occasion be short-term rather than lifetime. Karl Rahner has argued that the existential engagement in the ministerial task is of such a nature that this would be just as impossible as entering into an authentic marriage which is from the very beginning envisaged as short-term.³² Some Lutherans argue in what is in effect a similar way, though without mentioning marriage.³³ Yet it is hard to see how such considerations could be made the basis of a doctrinal affirmation.

Marriage and the ministry may be similar in that they are both vocational commitments which involve all aspects of a person's life, but they are fundamentally different in that the proprium of marriage is a special relation to another person, while the proprium of the ministry is a special relation to an office and community. Thus, within the framework of the Lutheran doctrine of the *ministerium verbi*, it would seem that the length of the term of service for which a man is called and ordained into the ministry must be regarded as *de iure humano*, even though there are strong reasons, similar to those of Rahner and Heubach, for believing that it should *normally* be lifelong.

My conclusion, therefore, is that despite Lutheran practice, I do not see how it would be possible to formulate a Lutheran doctrine of the permanence of the ministerial commission which would be operationally fully equivalent to the dogma of the *character indelebilis*. If there is nothing intrinsically impossible in short-term ordinations to the full ministry, then reordination in such cases would also be possible.

In concluding this exposition of the confessional doctrine of the min-

³⁰ Lieberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-28, and J. Heubach, *Die Ordination zum Amt der Kirche* (Berlin, 1956) pp. 80-81.

³¹ Lieberg, *op. cit.*, p. 227, n. 315. ³² Rahner, *op. cit.*, pp. 286 and 303.

³³ Cf. Heubach, *op. cit.*, pp. 117 ff., which deal with "Die Unabänderlichkeit des Auftrages—Segen oder Fluch".

istry, there is no need to summarize its results. These have already been presented in the outline at the beginning of this section. What remains, however, is the need for a theological evaluation of this doctrine in the light of the contemporary situation. It is to this we turn in the next section.

THE CONCEPT OF THE MINISTRY IN CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS

We are all familiar with the widespread contemporary insistence that changed historical circumstances make it necessary to think about the ministry in new ways. It is emphasized that traditional views were developed within the context of the "Constantinian era" or of "Christendom," in which virtually all members of the society were also professedly members of the church. In thinking of the ministry, therefore, attention was necessarily concentrated, not on the outward-directed general ministry of the whole church to unbelieving humanity, but on an inner-directed special ministry within the church. Now, however, so the argument goes, we are living in a diaspora situation which more and more resembles that of the first centuries. We can no longer think of the ministry primarily in terms of nurture in the faith, or of making those who are already Christian by social convention into Christians by personal commitment. Rather, the fundamental ministerial task must once again be thought of in terms of bringing the gospel to the world outside the church.

When this is done, three changes occur: first, the concept of the fundamental bearer or "subject" of the ministry is transformed; secondly, the notion of the ministry itself is greatly enlarged; thirdly, it is internally diversified. In commenting on these changes, I am inevitably influenced by the formulations which have developed in the World Council of Churches,³⁴ but similar ideas are of course also widespread in intra-Lutheran discussions as well as among Roman Catholics.

The first point might be expressed in the terminology, though not always the concepts, of the Reformers by saying that the ministry of the Word is primarily exercised, not by a special group within the church, but rather by the whole people of God. Not only the office but the church itself is conceived in functional terms. The church, in this perspective, is not only the *creatura verbi* but even more basically the *minister verbi*. To cite the currently popular slogan, "the church is mission" rather than simply having a mission, and this mission is to be a witness to (or, in more Catholic language, a "sacramental sign of") the

³⁴ Colin Williams, *The Church* (Philadelphia, 1968), gives extensive, though somewhat popularized, summaries of the World Council discussions. The single most important document is *The Church for Others* (Geneva, 1967).

external Word which is Jesus Christ. It is the church as a whole, not a group within the church, which is the city set on a hill, a light in the darkness, a candle on a candlestick (Mt 5:14-16).

We recall that such contemporary views are generally quite different from the individualistic interpretation of the priesthood of all believers which holds that "every Christian is a minister." While it is true that every Christian shares in the ministry of the church, he does so, not in the distributive sense of having a ministerial role similar to that of every other Christian, but rather in the corporate sense of being part of a community which, qua community, exercises the ministry. Thus, in the classic text for the universal priesthood (1 Pt 2:9-10), all the predicates used to describe that royal priesthood which God has chosen to declare His *aretas* (i.e., exercise the *ministerium verbi*) "are collective and corporate . . . and applicable only to a people, a community, and not to private individuals."³⁵

The second consequence of this changed perspective is that the concept of what is included in ministerial activity is greatly enlarged. The church proclaims the external Word, not only through preaching and sacraments, but through everything that it is and does. Thus, to cite 1 Peter again, the way in which God's people declare His wonderful works among the nations is through "good conduct" and "good deeds" (2:12). In the diaspora situation, now as in the first centuries, men are not likely to hear the gospel except to the degree that they find themselves compelled to say "See how these Christians love one another" (and God, and the world). We recall the much quoted complaint of Julian the Apostate that it was the Christians' "philanthropy towards strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and pretended holiness of life that have done most to increase atheism. . . . The impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well."³⁶ The church must again become deserving of comparable reproaches. In short, so it is claimed, the *ministerium verbi* includes both the internal *koinōnia* of Christians and their external humanizing action just as much as it does the liturgies of Word and sacrament.

This enlarged concept leads, in the third place, to an emphasis on the great diversity of roles within the ministry of the Word.

As we have mentioned, all Christians share in this ministry, but they do so in many different ways. The lay apostolate in its infinite variety of organized and unorganized forms is an integral part of the proclama-

³⁵ J. H. Elliott, in *Una sancta* 25 (1968) 24. See the same author's *The Elect and the Holy* (Supplements to *Novum Testamentum*, Vol. 12) for support for this corporate interpretation of 1 Pt 2:4-10.

³⁶ *Letters* 429D, 430D (in the Loeb Edition of the *Works* 3, pp. 69 and 71).

tion of the gospel. Indeed, a current slogan says that laymen are the primary ministers of the Word in the world. They are the ones who penetrate its structures and can most effectively testify to Christ by their actions and their words.

From this point of view, the concept of the office, of the special ministry within the church, also becomes more complex and less unified than in Reformation thought. The office is not the public ministry of the word par excellence, but rather is instrumental to that ministry. Nor can the office be defined generically in terms of preaching and the administration of the sacraments. Rather, to cite another slogan, its function is that of "equipping the whole people of God" to minister the Word through all that it is, says, and does. The *leitourgia* of preaching and sacramental celebration is an essential part of this task of equipping, but so also are the fostering of the *koinōnia* of unity in love and the furthering of the humanizing *diakonia* of the works of love. These latter activities require, in addition to those gifts of the Spirit which cannot be organized, various administrative, teaching, research, and action roles which may need to be institutionalized in public, ecclesiastical offices so that the church may better minister "the whole gospel to the whole man in the whole world" (to quote still another currently popular phrase).

These ideas, as we all know, are not only theoretical but related to changes in the concrete reality of the office. What in America are called "specialized ministries" proliferate everywhere. In the face of the new circumstances and complexities of modern life, the functions of the office, in Lutheran as in other churches, have become increasingly diversified. Many of those ordained to preaching and the administration of the sacraments find themselves called to quite different tasks, while the parish clergy spend less and less of their time and energy in performing their traditional functions. This growing gap between traditional views and current practice contributes to the present crises in the ministry. The old picture of the office developed within the context of a largely agrarian society in the age of Christendom is still embodied in doctrinal formulations and church law. New developments, therefore, occur in *ad hoc* and *sub rosa* ways, often without being subjected to any serious theological reflection on whether they authentically serve the equipping of God's people for gospel proclamation. In America, for example, a number of recent studies have pointed out how church structures and functions on both the congregational and denominational levels have been rationalized, bureaucratized, and specialized in almost slavish imitation of modern corporation and, to a lesser extent, governmental patterns; and this has happened even while the pretense

is maintained that nothing fundamental has changed.³⁷ This discrepancy between ministerial theory and practice is in some ways as great as that between Ignatian episcopal theory and the reality of the office of feudal prince-bishops.

There is, then, a crying need to reformulate the Reformation understanding of the ministry in the light of both the theological and the practical developments which we have sketched. The question is whether this can be done in such a way as to preserve the substance of the doctrine. No consensus exists among Lutherans on this point, just as there was no clear consensus at the Helsinki Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in 1963 on the analogous problem of how to state the Reformation doctrine of justification in contemporary terms. The fragmentary suggestions which I have to offer on this question, therefore, can at most claim to express a Lutheran, rather than *the* Lutheran, view.

1) The first of the premises of the Lutheran ministerial doctrine, viz., justification *sola fide* (CA IV), would of course continue to be maintained by all confessional Lutherans, but it is important to note that some of them would not assume as unquestioningly as was done by Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century that justifying faith is necessarily and always explicitly Christian. They would concede the thesis, now even more widespread among Catholics, that the grace of Christ may work "anonymously" in many ways and places, even to the extent of producing a justifying, though inarticulate and unconscious, trust in God's goodness.³⁸

2) If this is so, then the "external Word" in preaching and sacraments is not necessary means for "the obtaining of faith" in the sense that CA V obviously assumes that it is. It can be argued, however, that this does not involve a contradiction of the Confessions, for they do not face this issue. Article V is concerned to exclude the Anabaptist derogation of the external Word, and Lutherans who acknowledge the possibility of "anonymous faith" would wholeheartedly agree. Preaching

³⁷ A recent examination of this point is Gibson Winter, *Religious Identity: A Study of Religious Organization* (New York, 1968).

³⁸ The most notable proponent of this thesis is, of course, Karl Rahner. In one of his recent treatments of the subject he says that he does not insist on the terms "anonymous" or "implicit" Christianity, even though these still seem to him the best available ("Atheism und implizites Christentum," *Schriften zur Theologie* 8 (Einsiedeln, 1967) 187. Perhaps terminological changes would lessen the objections of some Lutherans, such as F. W. Kantzenbach, who do not deny that God acts redemptively apart from explicitly Christian faith, but have difficulties with Roman Catholic theories of how this happens (cf. Kantzenbach, "Die ekklesiologische Begründung des Heils der Nichtchristen," *Oecumenica* 1967 (n. 18 above) pp. 210-34.

and sacraments, and therefore also the ministerial office, are necessary to explicit faith and to the church, which is the company of explicit witness to God's redeeming action in Christ.

3) This results also in a change in the understanding of the relation of Articles IV and V, i.e., of the relation of explicit faith to the ministry. The Augsburg Confession describes the *ministerium verbi* as exclusively instrumental to faith. There is one-directional progression from faith as the goal (Art. IV) to the *ministerium verbi* as the means for obtaining faith (Art. V). But, in the enlarged concept of the ministry which we have sketched, the relation may sometimes be reversed. Explicit faith can be viewed as the instrument or means to that general ministry of witnessing to Christ which is the fundamental mission of the whole church. This general ministry is certainly not always a means to faith. Through it God also confounds the principalities and powers and arouses the hostility as well as the admiration of men like Julian the Apostate. This *ministerium verbi* has a social, historical, and even cosmic function in God's plan, and the explicitly Christian faith of the individual believer is the means through which he comes to participate in it.

4) The first change in the concept of the ecclesiastical office which results from this reinterpretation of the premises is, as we have seen, that its all-embracing function is defined as that of promoting the total ministry of the church rather than being almost exclusively focused on preaching and administration of the sacraments. This leads to greater emphasis on distinct offices within the public ministry. The Confessions allow this—e.g., the distinction *de iure humano* between priests and bishops—but now such diversification appears as positively desirable under normal circumstances for the very sake of the gospel. Not only should the restoration of the diaconate and episcopate be considered, but also other forms of ministry, some of which may never yet have been given structured expression in the history of the church.

A word more needs to be said in this connection regarding episcopal succession (and by extension the papacy, even though I will not explicitly mention it). From our present perspective, a stronger case can be made in favor of the historic episcopacy than is done in the Confessions. There the episcopacy is regarded as acceptable, though not necessary, "for the sake of love and unity" (SA III, 10), but now an additional argument is advanced by some Lutherans (e.g., Edmund Schlink).³⁹ The apostolic succession is positively desirable because of its value as a sign (which is efficacious when properly exercised) of the unity of the church in space and time which thereby strengthens the

³⁹In *The Coming Christ and the Coming Church* (Philadelphia, 1968) pp. 186-233.

witness to the universality of the reconciliation which is in Christ. It will be noted, however, that the argument is strictly functional. The episcopacy has no inherent, divinely guaranteed power to do this, but is simply an institutional structure which can become such a sign when it acts in obedience to the Word.⁴⁰

5) The next thing to observe is that in distinguishing the liturgical office of preaching and sacramental administration from other ministerial offices, we can no longer make use of the sixteenth-century form of the disjunction between the first as *de iure divino* and the others as *de iure humano*.

If one thinks in more consistently historical and functional terms than was possible at the time of the Reformation, then it becomes evident that no neat or permanent line can be drawn between these two categories. The Israelite monarchy, for example, is depicted in 1 Samuel 8 as being the product both of divine institution and of historical development, and in this sense both *ius divinum* and *ius humanum*. In the light of doubts about the direct dominical institution of baptism and the Lord's Supper, perhaps something similar must be said about even these two sacraments (though without the spiritualizing addendum that God willed their historical development, as in the case of the Israelite monarchy, as a response to human unfaithfulness). The same principle applies even more forcefully to the ministerial structures of the church. The structures which are essential to the church's mission (and in this sense *de iure divino*) may vary considerably in different circumstances. If this is so, then it is difficult to follow the tendency of the Confessions to regard the specifically liturgical office of preaching and sacramental administration as alone divinely ordained, and all others as *adiaphora*.

Indeed, the question must be raised in this perspective whether even this liturgical office is always necessary, always *de iure divino*. Did it exist in any visibly institutionalized form in Corinth?

⁴⁰This argument does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that one should strive towards the immediate restoration of the historic episcopacy wherever it is now lacking. That all depends on the circumstances. Thus Wilfrid Joest writes: "solange die bischöfliche Sukzession von anderen Kirchen als dogmatisch notwendig und im Sinne der Garantie der Erhaltung in der Einheit wahrer Lehre verstanden und gefordert wird, wäre das Bemühen um den Anschluss an diese Sukzession ein so zweideutiges Zeichen, dass wir besser daran tun, es zu unterlassen. Wo die formale Sukzession der Bischöfe auch durch die Reformation der Kirche hindurch erhalten blieb, mag man sich dessen ohne allzu grosses dogmatisches Pathos freuen. Wo sie—wie bei uns—gerade über der Reformation der Kirche verlörend, wird es richtig sein, durch den Verzicht auf Wiederanschluss an sie dafür ein Zeichen zu geben, dass die wahre Einheit der Kirche ihre Einheit im Zeugnis und Glauben des apostolischen Evangeliums von Christus ist..." ("Das Amt und die Einheit der Kirche," in *Die Autorität der Freiheit* [n. 21 above] p. 467).

This, however, is not a major problem for someone who agrees that the church is not a "Platonic republic" (Ap. VIII, 20) but is rather a historically and sociologically concrete community with all that this implies in terms of necessary institutional development. The office of preaching and sacramental administration is in the long run necessary to the very existence of the church as an explicitly Christian community, and this is true to an extent which cannot begin to be matched by any other office. It is the indispensable, minimal institutional requirement, but this does not mean that it is always either adequate or optimal. In this restricted sense it is still meaningful to say that this office is *de iure divino* in a way no other is.

6) All these changes are significant, but perhaps more important than any of them is the crisis which has overtaken the Reformation understanding of the Word. How can the church identify the authentic, living Word of God in its ever-changing circumstances? What is the true, apostolic interpretation of the tradition for our situation? The early church answered this question by creed, canon, and apostolic succession in office, but the unfaithfulness of the bishops, so Protestants claim, destroyed the credibility of this Catholic position. The Reformers found a substitute in the principle *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, but the plausibility of that solution depended on the maintenance of a reasonable consensus among those who were regarded as competent interpreters of the Bible, viz., the educated clergy and church leaders trained by the theological faculties. Now, however, the consensus has been eroded by historical studies and other intellectual developments, combined with the breakdown of the political, social, and institutional controls which enforced allegiance to a specific confessional tradition. The preacher must pick and choose among the theologians, and neither he nor his congregation has the old confidence that he stands in the place of Christ speaking the authoritative Word. Thus the earlier centrality of the preaching and professorial offices has greatly declined in practice, even if not in theory.

Yet this crisis is more theological and structural than strictly doctrinal. We noted that the Lutheran confessional position implies that the church as a community must watch over the office and the office holders to make sure that their teaching is in conformity to the Word. The identification of what is the authentic interpretation in words and deeds of the scriptural message depends ultimately on the Holy Spirit working through the *sensus fidelium*. Lutherans have done very little with this principle, in part perhaps because of the polemic against the Anabaptists, but also because it was (and is) difficult to give effective practical expression to it in the "Constantinian" era where masses are

Christian by social convention rather than personal commitment. Perhaps only if the diaspora situation develops much further will it be possible for the faithful people themselves to exercise ordered and structured responsibility for orthodoxy in co-operation with their leaders, consultation with their scholars, and assiduous listening to the scriptural witness. To the degree that this happens, an Anabaptist concern for the charismatic would be united with the Catholic stress on the office and the Reformation emphasis on the external Word.

In conclusion, such developments are not in contradiction to the fundamental thrust of the Lutheran doctrine of the *ministerium verbi*. They rather enlarge and complete it. They make apparent that not only the office but the whole church is a function of the ministry of the Word; and this, I would contend, is an insight demanded by faithfulness to the Reformation amidst the changing circumstances of our modern world.

QUESTIONS TO ROMAN CATHOLICS

In reading some of the recent Roman Catholic discussions of the ministerial office, the Lutheran is struck by the degree to which his traditional objections do not apply.⁴¹ It is not unusual, for example, to hear it said that "*Ministerium verbi* can perfectly well be understood as the function of the hierarchical office."⁴² In line with this emphasis, functional, social, and existential categories sometimes replace "metaphysical" and individualistic ones. Karl Rahner, for example, describes the special ministerial powers of the priest, not as infused qualities inherent in the individual, but as functions of the public office which he occupies. Therefore ordination is a sacrament, not because of infused powers, but because of the gift of what Roman Catholics traditionally call "the grace of orders," and this can be interpreted to correspond to that efficacious promise of the Holy Spirit for assistance in the performance of ministerial functions which the Reformers also recognized. The "indelible character" is similarly understood, not as an "imprint on the soul," but as the permanence of the ministerial vocation and the "indestructibility" of the "social sign" which is the rite of ordination.

There is also a tendency in some circles to argue functionally for the episcopacy and the papacy. These are necessary, not because some "magical" power "mechanically" resides in the See of Rome and in the unbroken succession of the acts of laying on episcopal hands, but be-

⁴¹ I have developed this point in "Karl Rahner and a Protestant View of the Sacramentality of the Ministry," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 21 (1966) 267-88.

⁴² Karl Rahner, *Servants of the Lord* (New York, 1968) p. 29.

cause the church, in one of its dimensions, is a thoroughly this-worldly society, a sociologically and historically concrete people which, like all such peoples, depends on the institutionalization of unity and continuity for the maintenance of self-identity—i.e., in order to continue to be the servant of the Word. This perspective seems to lead, on the Catholic side also, to a softening of the former sharp disjunction between *de iure divino* and *de iure humano*. Ecclesiastical offices, like the differentiation of the sacraments into their sevenfold form, are in a sense both *de iure divino* and *de iure humano*, for God wills the historical development of the offices precisely because they are humanly necessary for the *ministerium verbi*.

Some Roman Catholic authors, as we know, carry this functionalism even to the point of asking whether nonepiscopal ministerial orders may not be recognized as fully valid by the Roman Church, even without reordination, as long as they function properly. ("Proper functioning" includes the condition that these ministerial orders do not operate in opposition to that unity and order of the church which the Catholic affirms is most fully manifest in the Roman communion.)⁴³

These tendencies are reinforced by the new emphases on the "general priesthood," the primacy of the local congregation, collegiality, subsidiarity, and the servant character of the hierarchy with all that this implies for the restructuring of the relations of laity and clergy, and of the priestly, episcopal, and papal offices. Much that we have said in summarizing non-Catholic developments has its counterparts on the Roman side also.

This leads us, then, to the first question which Lutherans are inclined to ask: How seriously can these theological speculations be taken? Can they be successfully harmonized with the description of the hierarchical office in, e.g., chapter 3 of *Lumen gentium*? What is their concrete operational meaning, and how far might this be carried in practice?

There is, however, a second question which inevitably arises. Even granting the remarkable *rapprochement* now taking place, it seems that there is still one insurmountable barrier. Is it not true that Roman Catholics are irrevocably committed to the view that the legitimacy of the office ultimately guarantees the authenticity of proclamation, while the sons of the Reformation are equally committed to the converse, that the authenticity of proclamation is the only guarantee for the legitimacy of the office? Catholics, it would seem, must deny that the ministry of the church can become so unfaithful that it is obligatory (or

⁴³ E.g., F. J. van Beeck, "Towards an Ecumenical Understanding of the Sacraments," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 3 (1966) 57-112.

at least legitimate) on occasion to establish discontinuous ministerial orders, as was done in the sixteenth century; and this, according to the sons of the Reformation, shows that the Catholics make the ministry into something other than sheer service of the Word and instead regard it as a privilege, as possessing power over the Word. Lutherans make this charge with fear and trembling. They know full well that their churches may at times be less faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ than is the Roman Church. Still, the question of doctrinal principle remains important. This question of the ultimate supremacy of the Word, rather than detailed problems of sacramentality, episcopacy, or papacy, continues after four hundred years to be the locus of the decisive disagreement for many Lutherans.