The Preaching Office and the Preacher among American Lutherans Today

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I take what Francis Pieper once wrote as a worthy dictum for us all: “The doctrine of the Church is of such a nature that if a person erred earlier, all his doctrinal errors will reappear in his teaching concerning the Church.” The very same can be said of the ministry. Problems exist in our current practices and teachings about the preaching office in part because those teachings have not always been faithful to the central matter, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25 and SA II.1) and the preaching of this is God's own means for making faith. Consequently the Holy Spirit gets conscripted into theological service either to conserve power in ordained ministry or distribute it more widely in the royal priesthood and beyond, according to the struggles for influence in this old world. A bad Christology leads to a bad pneumatology and concludes with a bad ecclesiology.

This generation has been consumed by debates over the articles of church and ministry. Even so, current fights over the preaching office and the kinds of persons who can fill it do not indicate some confessional or basic error in evangelical teaching and preaching. In fact, despite the recent appearance of discord on the matter of the preaching office, we Lutherans in America have had a rather remarkable concord among disparate groups. Church historian Todd Nichol has conveniently summarized our basic agreements this way:

1) the public ministry of the church is of divine institution; 2) there is one such office of the public ministry; 3) the divinely appointed tasks of the public ministers of the church are to speak the Word of God and to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper; 4) the call to the public ministry normally originates in the local congregation; 5) ordination to the public ministry is the public attestation of the call to the ministry accompanied by the laying on of hands and intercessory prayer on behalf of the ordinand; 6) the office of oversight exists as a practical necessity, but its nature is a matter of ecclesiastical convention rather than of divine institution.
I am pleased to note that among American Lutherans the lead for this agreement may truly belong to C. F. W. Walther, despite his unnecessary addition (however provocative it is) of the "transference" theory of the keys.

Yet recent events have tested this Lutheran agreement in theology and practice concerning ministry. For my purposes here the most influential challenge to Lutheran teaching on ministry is the World Council of Churches Faith and Order document called *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM, 1982). The BEM document is difficult to read without assuming it intends to build a case for ordination as a sacrament in precisely the sense to which Luther and Melanchthon objected. In the ELCA we are still absorbing the impact of statements about ministry like this in BEM:

> It is especially in the eucharistic celebration that the ordained ministry is the *visible focus* of the deep and all-embracing communion between Christ and the members of his body. In the celebration of the eucharist, Christ gathers, teaches and nourishes the Church. It is Christ who invites to the meal and who presides at it. In most churches this presidency is *signified* and *represented* by an ordained minister [BEM Ministry II.B.14, emphasis added].

Is this ordained ministry at its pinnacle—a sign and re-presentation by which people may gain a visible focus on the universal church? Lutherans do not have a ministry of signs. But this has set the pattern for the way the ELCA has proceeded to make ecumenical agreements.

Initially ordination as a sacrament and the ministry’s work as sacrificial appeared as a conservative argument that links office and person by means of a charism by the Holy Spirit bestowed by those who already have the charism. It has been held that this sacramental ordination protects the church from having just any sort of person—male or female, homosexual or heterosexual—who has some public standing in a society demand the office as long as it is only a *function* that is performed, like preaching. But the opposite happened in the ELCA. A sacramental ordination into a distinct class led to the agreement with the Episcopal Church in the USA that is named *Call to Common Mission* (CCM). Instead of fostering ecumenical relations and opening the path to agreements with the Orthodox and Rome, however, this agreement began to undermine church unity in the ELCA and with Episcopalians. I joined an international group of Lutheran theologians who objected, and who posted an Admonition to the ELCA that reads in part:
In 1999 the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), in order to enter into full communion with the Episcopal Church USA, mandated on a churchwide scale episcopal succession and ordination by bishops for the sake of unity. It seems clear that the ELCA, by accepting these practices as a condition of unity, has made an adiaphoron into a theological necessity, thus contradicting its own confessional basis. What intimates that this might not be so is the by-law amendment (ELCA Constitution 7.31.17) allowing presbyteral ordination. In order to ensure that an adiaphoron has not been made a theological necessity, however, what is now an exception must be made an option of equal standing. Likewise the two practices of installing bishops, with or without the participation of (three) bishops in episcopal succession, must be options of equal standing.5

The abandonment that CCM required of the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession (what Leif Grane calls the most ecumenical proposal extant) was made under the cover of adiaphora. But, as Lutherans who confess the Formula of Concord know, when an adiaphoron comes to be required “in one way” in order to allow for interchange of ministers, such a matter ceases to be an adiaphoron.

This ecumenical agreement now affects Lutherans worldwide because it is unique in requiring one church’s rite and its historic episcopate as the form of ordination that makes full, visible church unity, that is, the exchange of ministers. In order to deal with the obvious confessional problem and make CCM passable, a constitutional bylaw amendment was passed by an ELCA Churchwide Assembly. The bylaw theoretically allows presbyteral ordinations that are called “exceptional” and are granted only under circumstances of “conscience” as judged by individual bishops. This is a cancer growing in the ELCA, but it is also its lifeline. The church must get rid of this bylaw for unity with Episcopalians and for the sake of its own ability to order ordination. At the very same time, the church requires it in order to remain faithful to its own Confessions, that it is enough to agree upon Word and sacraments, while human traditions do not need to be the same everywhere (AC VII). Our church is now in an ecumenical cul-de-sac and does not know how to proceed, except for one constant—it does not want to be like the Missouri Synod!

Church Polity and Eschatology

When I think about current troubles in the churches that spring from bad polity, whether congregational, presbyteral, or episcopal, I can understand the vehemence of the two recurring arguments regarding ministry: that the office of ministry is instituted by God either as momen-
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I think of the trouble among us caused by the likes of Schleiermacher and Hoeftling, theories of donated rights by social contract that leave the public minister as a functionary of the strange whims of any given congregation. But then I think also of the trouble caused by Stephanism, Grabau, or even Lohe’s attempt to refute transference theories by removing the keys from the baptized altogether. Or when I think, for example, of one thousand people from the ELCA selected primarily by episcopal means, praying to the Holy Spirit to guide them at an Assembly, then taking a vote on whether or not homosexual behavior is any longer a sin in need of repentance and forgiveness, it is truly astonishing. Antinomianism is always a grand and terrible spectacle, as Luther once said, played out before an empty theater. In the light of such events, it is indeed tempting to think that a better polity must exist which does not confuse Enthusiasts with the ruling “expression” of an entire church. It is tempting to think that because troubles in the church were caused by bad polity, good polity would correct them. No doubt there is some truth in that, but a very limited one.

In fact, I am willing to join with you in learning how to make that better polity. But in doing so, we must account for what it is like to live in our old world with its form of authority by law, and what it means to have a church that is indeed a new creation, created by the word of the gospel. If we cannot work with the eschatological distinction of new and old we will always face the same struggle the world does between what must be preserved from the old to retain freedom, and what must be destroyed by revolution in order to establish a freedom not yet granted (conservative vs. liberal).

The Office of Ministry and Sacerdotal Class

One important part of fights over the ministry today is the experience of being swept up in social, political issues larger than any one of us, to which we would capitulate were it not for the truth that this world and its law does not command Christ or His new kingdom. Were it not for the word of the gospel we would indeed be just a little bobber floating on the surface of a large cultural sea whose waves ineluctably
take us where they will, not where we will. In America, this large cultural sea assumes that freedom is based upon *individual choices of the free will* and the *abolition of inequalities* that limit any of those choices. It is assumed that true freedom arrives when each one stands as equal of all others before a limitless smorgasbord of possibilities (and our choices are usually private—none of your business)! We have a cultural eschatology, we could say. For us, the future is a project, and the project is *self-creation*. But since some are in the vanguard and are currently freer than others in creating a limitless self, we end up creating classes and estates despite ourselves.

The Reformation and our Lutheran Confession deny the existence of a special spiritual estate above other Christians, not because of a liberal hope, but because we have a *ministerium verbi*, a ministry of the Word. To be a public minister is not to be a member of an estate but to exercise an office, which means to perform a service that is none other than proclamation of the law and gospel to actual sinners. But we seem always to be the sorts of people, regardless of our Confession, who create special classes. Current fights about authority in the church result in part from a highly politicized set of clergy who find themselves in general opposition to an equally politicized set of laypeople. Among Lutherans such has been the case at least since the French Revolution, with thinkers like Hegel and Schleiermacher who have attempted to follow the new revolutionary spirit in church and theology. This has created a long theological battle that has divided churches and people into revolutionary and conservative, and the experiences of Lutherans in Prussia and the Union churches put Lutherans at the very heart of these modern political battles.

To speak theologically, we may say that revolution or progressivism associates itself with *Spirit* as something self-transcending toward a higher goal, and they call this the “new.” Opposition to such revolution associates itself with the *Father*, and what has always been in creation—the “old.” In the recent past this fight was waged over whether or not something like “orders” of creation exist or such talk is merely a tool of totalitarian ideology. Do all differentiations between people become obstacles to freedom that require equal possibilities to meet individual needs? In such a situation the Father’s creation of the past seems to struggle against the Spirit who is believed to be my own personal future as self-created project. In the tug-of-war between Spirit and Father, the odd man out, so to speak, is always Jesus Christ. More precisely, the loser is the person of Christ in His hypostatic union of divine and human natures—which natures are pulled apart from these
two sides like a dry old wishbone instead of being given to sinners as a whole for their justification. Lutherans do not normally forget Jesus Christ or dismember Him like this unless politicized into an imaginary opposition between the Spirit and Father over the nature of creation. But we have been so politicized and the revolutionary spirit enters in the form of a speculation: "If we are not bound to the divine right of kings or to rigid orders of classes or callings in life, we may also not be bound to our creatureliness as differentiated bodies either."

I believe the world has reaped large benefits from the American form of the revolutionary spirit of the last three centuries, and yet it has also locked us in intractable battles socially and ecclesiastically over the basic matters of our bodily and created existence and the future to which we are given. In present-day America our elections and public political life are often turning on what are called family issues, with regard to which you become identified as either conservative or liberal, traditional or progressive. What is the public role of women in society if they are not confined by nature to the home? Is abortion a right of privacy and more specifically one given singularly to women since childbirth naturally involves their own bodies so completely? What is the source of homosexuality and does such behavior harm or help a society—or is even this life a matter of privacy? Since these matters relate directly to how we understand God the Father as creator, and humans as creatures, these questions also affect our churches, the royal priesthood, and the public, preaching office.

In the ELCA these political matters concerning our creatureliness are especially contentious because, on the one hand, ordained clergy in that church are overwhelmingly liberal on these social issues before us. They function as a separate class regardless of our Lutheran teaching that ordained clergy are not. They are elite intelligentsia, whether they like to think of themselves that way or not. On the other hand, congregations in the ELCA are, though individually of many types, largely traditional on the matters of creaturely life. They function as another, and lower, class in the ELCA.

But there is yet more complication in our political lives. In nineteenth-century Germany in particular, there were fairly clear lines of demarcation that could develop between conservative and liberal groups on the question of how one structures the ministry of the church. A conservative was anti-revolutionary, anti-revolutionary was to advocate hierarchical and Roman arrangements for the ministry, and to argue for a particular teaching office or apostolate that could defend itself against the ravages of time by means of an historic episcopate, or at
least a separate origin from the creation of the baptized, royal priesthood.

Then, if you were liberal, you developed a theory of delegation of authority from congregation to pastor and a democratization of the spirit, as a direct communication without external office or word being necessary; that is, one followed, as with Schleiermacher, the inner spirit and a form of preaching that expressed such inner light. So, in the past, there was a fairly clear choice: one could become Evangelical Catholic, borrowing from Rome rather freely on the matter of ministry, or one could be Protestant, borrowing from the Reformed. In either case, one could feel confident that some important Lutheran position was being held—such as the external means on one side, or the rejection of priestly mediators in matters of faith on the other.

But in our American situation the matter has divided again, like a virus growing out of control. New alliances are being forged in key political matters between Roman Catholics and American Evangelicals despite traditional oppositions between the two theologically. Agreement on opposition to abortion and issues like divorce or the marriage of homosexuals are forging new alliances between these groups. For some in the ELCA, one of the means of conserving true teaching was a return to Roman-style episcopacy. The means was to establish the historic episcopate in the Lutheran churches, and this was done through CCM. But instead of giving the church a conservative institution faithful to the creating Father, such episcopacy has now been used for the most revolutionary of purposes. One can now bypass churchly polities of any sort like presbyteries or churchwide assemblies or congregational votes simply by electing a practicing homosexual as bishop. Suddenly, what had been a bulwark of conservatism has now become the very means for the progressive, spiritual revolution. Now the Evangelical Catholic movement, once so vibrant in the ELCA, is in shambles, and the ELCA has a revolutionary episcopate.

The Presence of Christ and His Preachers of the Cross

But I intend to speak to you not primarily about current church politics following the impact of the ecumenical movement, or even our political lives as Americans. I want to focus on how we can, as Professor Gerhard Forde once put it, "work out a view of ministry consequent to and consistent with the fundamental theological doctrines that gave birth to the Lutheran movement in the first place." He once did this by noting that the office of preaching is grounded theologically in
the doctrine of election. I will do the same here, but draw out the min­istry especially from its christological roots.

As we know, Lutherans never cease to discuss the preaching office because it is the “womb of Christ.” If one were to point today to where Christ is present as your own merciful God, one would point to the preaching office: as Luther once said, “nothing else will do.” But it is more than the dearness of the subject and the joy at what it means to get a preacher that drives the discussion. Despite our very consider­able agreement on the ordering of ministry, something is not right about the way Lutherans are teaching the office of the ministry, whether they develop high or low clericalism.

Regarding the office of preaching, we are undergoing a loss of heart by ministers and a betrayal of Christ by the pursuit of two wrongheaded spiritualisms. Traditionalists and progressives have each misused the Holy Spirit for their own purposes. One side transfers the Holy Spirit’s power in the specific form of the rite of ordination as itself a sacra­ment, the other imagines the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer without mediation. Such spiritualisms fail because they suppress the eschatological reality, that is, the distinction between old and new on the basis of Christ’s cross. When such a distinction is suppressed, ministry and faith must fight for space in the old world according to its ontology that always divides up into classes of master and slave.

How can we do better? Since the office of preaching is Christ’s office, and Christ remains present in the flesh with His full divinity, preaching too is sacramental. That means that we derive our teaching of the office of the ministry from its roots as God’s own election of sinners, making faith where there was none. Immediately we must then deal with the deep offense that glory-seeking sinners have at the incarn­ation. I don’t mean that people are offended at a general idea of incarn­ation, but the incarnation of Jesus Christ in particular is offensive. His arrival to us is lowly—first in the womb, then the manger, then as the Galilean carpenter’s son who became not king and lord of this world but simply a preacher. Worse yet, he preached forgiveness to those who were seeking other, better remedies for their ills. This preacher was then betrayed by his apostolate, crucified, and died outside the walls of the Holy City, in the refuse of this world’s attempts at sacrifice to God.

Ministers and congregations have naturally sought victory and power and influence in the world, but cannot seem to establish it to their satisfaction. Pastors should be paid more. They ought to have more mobility. They ought to be treated with greater dignity. Lay and
ordained together should work toward the common mission, and our churches should be much fuller than they are on any given Sunday with the great variety of people that make up our parishes. One would think that we ought to lift high the cross and proclaim the love of Christ boldly, but the cross keeps refusing to be used as a symbol of victory. It becomes too real where we bear one ourselves, and the cross of Christ is too final, violent, and accusatory to be borne by any but Christ Himself.

It is little wonder that the incarnation is either dispensed with entirely, except as a sign or symbol, as Zwingli, the sacramentarians, and spiritualists have done. Or else the very incarnation and cross are constrained and given out in small doses so that Christ's flesh works like a temporary breach in the wall between sacred and profane, divine and human, heavenly and earthly, and Christ must be re-presented under carefully controlled conditions where proper preparation can be made by means of a sacrificial priesthood.

But the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ are all accomplished, historical facts and—much more—eschatological facts, bringing an end to all that preceded, and commencing afresh the line of humans as a new creation. That means, at the very least, that Jesus Christ is present, whether we know it and like it or not. And that presence is incarnate in the lowliest of lives, whether we believe it, know it, like it or not. More pointedly, that presence of Christ is not going anywhere, but will be reckoned with, or better will reckon with you, one way or another. Jesus is already here and going nowhere, and He will be encountered either with His promise or not, with His external Word or without, with a preacher or without. When Christ is encountered without His Word and ministry, He is experienced as wrath at sin whose wages are death, and God in His awful hiddenness is the paymaster. But when Christ is present as a promise, given freely, the downpayment is the Holy Spirit who takes the words of the preacher and creates faith “where and when it pleases Him.” What pleases the Spirit is the forgiveness of sins on account of Christ's covering of our sins by taking those sins upon Him and leaving them nailed with His old, dead body on the cross.

This comes at great cost to Christ, but is free of all charge to us as new creatures. Yet a series of disgraceful things follow—that is, they appear disgraceful for us who are being killed all the day long. Christ alone saves. No other. He does so by His Word. His Word is given to ambassadors, preachers whom He Himself sends. By this means He elects His own, in place and time, that is, where Christ's and the Father's Holy Spirit wills it. And the ones He wills to save are the weak, the
ugly, the worthless, the sinner—paying the one who has labored all day in the vineyard the same as the one who has worked only one hour (in truly anti-American fashion). There is no way around the double offense of this Word: first, that I am not able to do one whit to save myself, rather I am already done and judged as sinner to be damned, through and through. Where Christ intrudes Himself, there ends the pious desire to be righteous in myself that will not die until the Old Adam is dead. Then, second, that Christ alone saves by His cross which I am blamed for—whether I know it, believe it, like it or not. He does so by coming down and staying, giving no room for my free will, and instead taking up all room, even from myself, so that I am nothing other in His new world and kingdom than what He gives, bestows upon me day by day.

I never get beyond having life only moment by moment as He deigns to give it. Thus if He seeks to raise me up, so I am raised. And if He seeks to do this through a promise put into water at baptism, so it is, and if He seeks to forgive by putting His promise in bread and wine, so it comes, and when He seeks to absolve and free of sin, death, and the devil by sending an underpaid preacher of the gospel, so He does. Then, if He chooses to keep me—old, sick, dying in myself in this old world—while giving eternal life to me only by faith (that is, not by anything I see, but only by means of the words spoken), so it is. I am then given vocation that serves others and by which others wear the old life out of me until I am dead and gone. So it is. This latter, of course, is especially hard to take for called and ordained ministers of the church of Christ since their person is treated in their vocation no differently by God than a fireman or high school cafeteria employee or a mother of children—even though the vocation is the highest given because it is the means by which the dead are raised to eternal life.

The church, and its public ministers especially, have shied away from this teaching for good reason. They are just too near the nuclear core of the reactor—the offensive, lowly incarnation of Jesus Christ with His cross. Instead, we have found very intricate and rather convincing arguments for the total or partial absence of Christ, His body, His cross, His death, sometimes by attempting to draw out the office of ministry from the resurrection and the witnesses to the resurrection alone. The history of ministry could be written on this one theme of running away from cross and incarnation, as for example we find in the Magdeburg Centuries. It is on account of who Christ is and what He did and does that the church is hidden, most especially in its unmistakable visibility of preaching and sacraments (the external Word).
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**The Office of Ministry and Sacerdotal Class**

One important part of fights over the ministry today is the experience of being swept up in social, political issues larger than any one of us, to which we would capitulate were it not for the truth that this world and its law does not command Christ or His new kingdom. Were it not for the word of the gospel we would indeed be just a little bobber floating on the surface of a large cultural sea whose waves ineluctably
take us where they will, not where we will. In America, this large cultural sea assumes that freedom is based upon individual choices of the free will and the abolition of inequalities that limit any of those choices. It is assumed that true freedom arrives when each one stands as equal of all others before a limitless smorgasbord of possibilities (and our choices are usually private—none of your business)! We have a cultural eschatology, we could say. For us, the future is a project, and the project is self-creation. But since some are in the vanguard and are currently freer than others in creating a limitless self, we end up creating classes and estates despite ourselves.

The Reformation and our Lutheran Confession deny the existence of a special spiritual estate above other Christians, not because of a liberal hope, but because we have a ministerium verbi, a ministry of the Word. To be a public minister is not to be a member of an estate but to exercise an office, which means to perform a service that is none other than proclamation of the law and gospel to actual sinners. But we seem always to be the sorts of people, regardless of our Confession, who create special classes. Current fights about authority in the church result in part from a highly politicized set of clergy who find themselves in general opposition to an equally politicized set of laypeople. Among Lutherans such has been the case at least since the French Revolution, with thinkers like Hegel and Schleiermacher who have attempted to follow the new revolutionary spirit in church and theology. This has created a long theological battle that has divided churches and people into revolutionary and conservative, and the experiences of Lutherans in Prussia and the Union churches put Lutherans at the very heart of these modern political battles.

To speak theologically, we may say that revolution or progressivism associates itself with Spirit as something self-transcending toward a higher goal, and they call this the “new.” Opposition to such revolution associates itself with the Father, and what has always been in creation—the “old.” In the recent past this fight was waged over whether or not something like “orders” of creation exist or such talk is merely a tool of totalitarian ideology. Do all differentiations between people become obstacles to freedom that require equal possibilities to meet individual needs? In such a situation the Father’s creation of the past seems to struggle against the Spirit who is believed to be my own personal future as self-created project. In the tug-of-war between Spirit and Father, the odd man out, so to speak, is always Jesus Christ. More precisely, the loser is the person of Christ in His hypostatic union of divine and human natures—which natures are pulled apart from these
two sides like a dry old wishbone instead of being given to sinners as a whole for their justification. Lutherans do not normally forget Jesus Christ or dismember Him like this unless politicized into an imaginary opposition between the Spirit and Father over the nature of creation. But we have been so politicized and the revolutionary spirit enters in the form of a speculation: "If we are not bound to the divine right of kings or to rigid orders of classes or callings in life, we may also not be bound to our creatureliness as differentiated bodies either."

I believe the world has reaped large benefits from the American form of the revolutionary spirit of the last three centuries, and yet it has also locked us in intractable battles socially and ecclesiastically over the basic matters of our bodily and created existence and the future to which we are given. In present-day America our elections and public political life are often turning on what are called family issues, with regard to which you become identified as either conservative or liberal, traditional or progressive. What is the public role of women in society if they are not confined by nature to the home? Is abortion a right of privacy and more specifically one given singularly to women since childbirth naturally involves their own bodies so completely? What is the source of homosexuality and does such behavior harm or help a society—or is even this life a matter of privacy? Since these matters relate directly to how we understand God the Father as creator, and humans as creatures, these questions also affect our churches, the royal priesthood, and the public, preaching office.

In the ELCA these political matters concerning our creatureliness are especially contentious because, on the one hand, ordained clergy in that church are overwhelmingly liberal on these social issues before us. They function as a separate class regardless of our Lutheran teaching that ordained clergy are not. They are elite intelligentsia, whether they like to think of themselves that way or not. On the other hand, congregations in the ELCA are, though individually of many types, largely traditional on the matters of creaturely life. They function as another, and lower, class in the ELCA.

But there is yet more complication in our political lives. In nineteenth-century Germany in particular, there were fairly clear lines of demarcation that could develop between conservative and liberal groups on the question of how one structures the ministry of the church. A conservative was anti-revolutionary, anti-revolutionary was to advocate hierarchical and Roman arrangements for the ministry, and to argue for a particular teaching office or apostolate that could defend itself against the ravages of time by means of an historic episcopate, or at
least a separate origin from the creation of the baptized, royal priesthood.

Then, if you were liberal, you developed a theory of delegation of authority from congregation to pastor and a democratization of the spirit, as a direct communication without external office or word being necessary; that is, one followed, as with Schleiermacher, the inner spirit and a form of preaching that expressed such inner light. So, in the past, there was a fairly clear choice: one could become Evangelical Catholic, borrowing from Rome rather freely on the matter of ministry, or one could be Protestant, borrowing from the Reformed. In either case, one could feel confident that some important Lutheran position was being held—such as the external means on one side, or the rejection of priestly mediators in matters of faith on the other.

But in our American situation the matter has divided again, like a virus growing out of control. New alliances are being forged in key political matters between Roman Catholics and American Evangelicals despite traditional oppositions between the two theologically. Agreement on opposition to abortion and issues like divorce or the marriage of homosexuals are forging new alliances between these groups. For some in the ELCA, one of the means of conserving true teaching was a return to Roman-style episcopacy. The means was to establish the historic episcopate in the Lutheran churches, and this was done through CCM. But instead of giving the church a conservative institution faithful to the creating Father, such episcopacy has now been used for the most revolutionary of purposes. One can now bypass churchly polities of any sort like presbyteries or churchwide assemblies or congregational votes simply by electing a practicing homosexual as bishop. Suddenly, what had been a bulwark of conservatism has now become the very means for the progressive, spiritual revolution. Now the Evangelical Catholic movement, once so vibrant in the ELCA, is in shambles, and the ELCA has a revolutionary episcopate.

**The Presence of Christ and His Preachers of the Cross**

But I intend to speak to you not primarily about current church politics following the impact of the ecumenical movement, or even our political lives as Americans. I want to focus on how we can, as Professor Gerhard Forde once put it, "work out a view of ministry consequent to and consistent with the fundamental theological doctrines that gave birth to the Lutheran movement in the first place." He once did this by noting that the office of preaching is grounded theologically in
the doctrine of election. I will do the same here, but draw out the ministry especially from its christological roots.

As we know, Lutherans never cease to discuss the preaching office because it is the "womb of Christ." If one were to point today to where Christ is present as your own merciful God, one would point to the preaching office: as Luther once said, "nothing else will do." But it is more than the dearness of the subject and the joy at what it means to get a preacher that drives the discussion. Despite our very considerable agreement on the ordering of ministry, something is not right about the way Lutherans are teaching the office of the ministry, whether they develop high or low clericalism.

Regarding the office of preaching, we are undergoing a loss of heart by ministers and a betrayal of Christ by the pursuit of two wrongheaded spiritualisms. Traditionalists and progressives have each misused the Holy Spirit for their own purposes. One side transfers the Holy Spirit's power in the specific form of the rite of ordination as itself a sacrament,8 the other imagines the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer without mediation. Such spiritualisms fail because they suppress the eschatological reality, that is, the distinction between old and new on the basis of Christ's cross. When such a distinction is suppressed, ministry and faith must fight for space in the old world according to its ontology that always divides up into classes of master and slave.

How can we do better? Since the office of preaching is Christ's office, and Christ remains present in the flesh with His full divinity, preaching too is sacramental. That means that we derive our teaching of the office of the ministry from its roots as God's own election of sinners, making faith where there was none. Immediately we must then deal with the deep offense that glory-seeking sinners have at the incarnation. I don't mean that people are offended at a general idea of incarnation, but the incarnation of Jesus Christ in particular is offensive. His arrival to us is lowly—first in the womb, then the manger, then as the Galilean carpenter's son who became not king and lord of this world but simply a preacher. Worse yet, he preached forgiveness to those who were seeking other, better remedies for their ills. This preacher was then betrayed by his apostolate, crucified, and died outside the walls of the Holy City, in the refuse of this world's attempts at sacrifice to God.

Ministers and congregations have naturally sought victory and power and influence in the world, but cannot seem to establish it to their satisfaction. Pastors should be paid more. They ought to have more mobility. They ought to be treated with greater dignity. Lay and
ordained together should work toward the common mission, and our churches should be much fuller than they are on any given Sunday with the great variety of people that make up our parishes. One would think that we ought to lift high the cross and proclaim the love of Christ boldly, but the cross keeps refusing to be used as a symbol of victory. It becomes too real where we bear one ourselves, and the cross of Christ is too final, violent, and accusatory to be borne by any but Christ Himself.

It is little wonder that the incarnation is either dispensed with entirely, except as a sign or symbol, as Zwingli, the sacramentarians, and spiritualists have done. Or else the very incarnation and cross are constrained and given out in small doses so that Christ’s flesh works like a temporary breach in the wall between sacred and profane, divine and human, heavenly and earthly, and Christ must be re-presented under carefully controlled conditions where proper preparation can be made by means of a sacrificial priesthood.

But the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ are all accomplished, historical facts and—much more—eschatological facts, bringing an end to all that preceded, and commencing afresh the line of humans as a new creation. That means, at the very least, that Jesus Christ is present, whether we know it and like it or not. And that presence is incarnate in the lowliest of lives, whether we believe it, know it, like it or not. More pointedly, that presence of Christ is not going anywhere, but will be reckoned with, or better will reckon with you, one way or another. Jesus is already here and going nowhere, and He will be encountered either with His promise or not, with His external Word or without, with a preacher or without. When Christ is encountered without His Word and ministry, He is experienced as wrath at sin whose wages are death, and God in His awful hiddenness is the paymaster. But when Christ is present as a promise, given freely, the downpayment is the Holy Spirit who takes the words of the preacher and creates faith “where and when it pleases Him.” What pleases the Spirit is the forgiveness of sins on account of Christ’s covering of our sins by taking those sins upon Him and leaving them nailed with His old, dead body on the cross.

This comes at great cost to Christ, but is free of all charge to us as new creatures. Yet a series of disgraceful things follow—that is, they appear disgraceful for us who are being killed all the day long. Christ alone saves. No other. He does so by His Word. His Word is given to ambassadors, preachers whom He Himself sends. By this means He elects His own, in place and time, that is, where Christ’s and the Father’s Holy Spirit wills it. And the ones He wills to save are the weak, the
ugly, the worthless, the sinner—paying the one who has labored all day in the vineyard the same as the one who has worked only one hour (in truly anti-American fashion). There is no way around the double offense of this Word: first, that I am not able to do one whit to save myself, rather I am already done and judged as sinner to be damned, through and through. Where Christ intrudes Himself, there ends the pious desire to be righteous in myself that will not die until the Old Adam is dead. Then, second, that Christ alone saves by His cross which I am blamed for—whether I know it, believe it, like it or not. He does so by coming down and staying, giving no room for my free will, and instead taking up all room, even from myself, so that I am nothing other in His new world and kingdom than what He gives, loans, bestows upon me day by day.

I never get beyond having life only moment by moment as He deigns to give it. Thus if He seeks to raise me up, so I am raised. And if He seeks to do this through a promise put into water at baptism, so it is, and if He seeks to forgive by putting His promise in bread and wine, so it comes, and when He seeks to absolve and free of sin, death, and the devil by sending an underpaid preacher of the gospel, so He does. Then, if He chooses to keep me—old, sick, dying in myself in this old world—while giving eternal life to me only by faith (that is, not by anything I see, but only by means of the words spoken), so it is. I am then given vocation that serves others and by which others wear the old life out of me until I am dead and gone. So it is. This latter, of course, is especially hard to take for called and ordained ministers of the church of Christ since their person is treated in their vocation no differently by God than a fireman or high school cafeteria employee or a mother of children—even though the vocation is the highest given because it is the means by which the dead are raised to eternal life.

The church, and its public ministers especially, have shied away from this teaching for good reason. They are just too near the nuclear core of the reactor—the offensive, lowly incarnation of Jesus Christ with His cross. Instead, we have found very intricate and rather convincing arguments for the total or partial absence of Christ, His body, His cross, His death, sometimes by attempting to draw out the office of ministry from the resurrection and the witnesses to the resurrection alone. The history of ministry could be written on this one theme of running away from cross and incarnation, as for example we find in the Magdeburg Centuries. It is on account of who Christ is and what He did and does that the church is hidden, most especially in its unmistakable visibility of preaching and sacraments (the external Word).
Christ's Absence and the Spirit as Fill-in

Theologically, both delegated and ontological theories of ordination assume Christ's strategic absence and therefore make room for ministry by positing the need for a means of temporarily re-presenting Him as needed. Both theories are types of spiritualism. Spiritualisms of various sorts try to put the Holy Spirit where Christ is deemed absent, as even the Great Theologian Gregory of Nazianzus taught it in his Oration on the Holy Ghost: "He [Christ] ascends; the Spirit takes his place." Our collective teachings about ministry have assumed the partial but real absence of Christ, and then proceeded to suggest how the void should be filled with a partially present Holy Spirit in search of a bodily, realized, historical presence like that of the minister.

The problem has long been known christologically as the Nestorian problem, after the old bishop of Constantinople who could not call Mary the bearer of God. But when Luther took this up (precisely in opposition to the sacramentarians and Rome) in his Smalcald Articles, he did not stop at the incomplete doctrine of Christ's personal union at the Council of Chalcedon. Rather, he dug down all the way to the origin of sin itself in the Garden of Eden. Imagine that! We are dealing with a very old problem indeed. There in the Garden was begun a search for better words than the external ones already given to Adam and Eve by their Creator. It took no more than a second to move from grateful creatures receiving all at the hand of a bounteous Creator and end up in complete, illusory spiritualism. Luther called it what it was: Enthusiasm, seeking-God-within-ism. 10

What this has to do with the office of ministry is this: the Holy Spirit is not bestowing a special power in ordination for the forgiveness of sins that baptism does not give, nor is the ordained minister an employee of the congregation and under its contracted or transferred power. Luther put his finger on this when he finally realized that what Zwingli's method of Scripture interpretation (alleosis) was doing to the sacraments on one side, the office of the papacy and the ontological priesthood that descends from it was doing on the other side. Yet, as different-looking as Zwingli's reform and the old Catholic Church appeared on the surface, they were theologically alike in this one essential way: they were both Enthusiasts, God-within-ers, who ended up denying the external Word and claiming power over that Word by means of an illusory theory for their own forms of ministry. It is not by coincidence that both Zwingli and the papacy produced new eucharistic prayers of sacrifice, for example, and both became preoccupied with the Holy Spirit as an addition to a partially absent Christ.
Yet this means we have a problem with the gospel itself, and one that is in need of more than a doctrinal patch to resolve it. I suggest that we can find the greatest help for this conundrum not in Dr. Pieper’s third volume of Christian Dogmatics in the section on “Church and Public Ministry” (though of course there is much good to be found there), but especially in the second volume on the “Doctrine of Christ and the Personal Union and Communion of Attributes.” Pieper wrote:

... let us consider the kingly office of Christ. This office consists partly in this, that He is present in His Church on earth, fills the Church, which is His body, and rules and preserves it against the gates of hell. But from this activity of Christ the Reformed exclude His human nature, because it is incapable of any omnipotent action, and because it has only a local and visible mode of subsistence and so does not extend beyond ordinary human size. For this reason the Heidelberg Catechism, Question 47, declares that Christ’s human nature today is no more present in His Church on earth. Christ, in so far as His human nature is concerned, rules His Church in absentia, just as earthly sovereigns are obliged to do.

It would be a mistake to think that this is only a dispute with the Reformed or American-type Protestants. Pieper, of course, spends his time responding to the Reformed since we are Lutherans in America, but he recognized that there are Reformed and Roman Catholic theologians who deny the participation of the human nature not only nominally (per modum loquendi) but actually (realiter) in all the divine attributes. It is also the same assumption of the doctrine called totus Christus borrowed from Augustine (nominally referred to by Luther) and presently employed ecumenically by Roman Catholics that says Jesus Christ is the Head, the visible church on earth is His body, and the office of the papacy and historic episcopacy function to keep these two together. By the highest office of ministry Christ is held together, caput et membra, and thus survives through history as whole Christ, totus Christus.

But we teach differently. Christ is present, inside and outside the church (as Pieper goes on to argue), and the difficult matter that we must come to grips with is that the presence of Christ is inconvenient and downright fearful, especially for those in the church. There is a theological reason for this fear. Where Christ is so fully present, divine and human, spirit and body, with all He has and is, then the judgment He exercises over His sinners seems too close. And, yet more: even when He gives Himself to sinners as sheer mercy, gratis, such a gift seems not to leave anything more for decent, law-abiding Christians to do! In other words, Christ interferes with the dream of our free will.
Doctrines of ministry have spun themselves around this fear of Christ in ways that, despite the longevity of their human traditions, obscure and deny the gospel itself. They do this from above or below, by congregational church polity or hierarchical, sacerdotal polities. And the consequence is always the same: the church substitutes itself for Christ, the minister takes the place of Christ not as preacher but as “sign” of unity and re-presenter—in sacrificial, mystical communion presently called “Eucharist,” or in moments of human decision in favor of Christ, or in spiritual ecstasies accompanied by signs of spirit-power.

But Christ is already there with all His divinity and bodily corpulence, even before the all-important preacher arrives. Now what is needed is not re-presenting Him to mind, will, or feeling, or pointing by means of a sign, but listening to what He actually says to and for you in the here and now. The words one hears do not just provide information but they accomplish what they say. A whole set of Lutheran teachings offend us at this point, in just the right way to make faith itself as our righteousness. Let us name just a few having to do with the preaching office:

1. God elects His own (yes, even “predestines” if we don’t take this childishly as something that occurred outside the proclamation itself).
2. Our wills are bound, so that not only have we no free choices in matters above us, but our choices already are in direct and mortal opposition to our Creator.
3. Salvation comes by Christ’s cross, and so when that cross is preached and applied to us it accomplishes two things: it accuses us of killing God and it conforms us to Christ, that is, to His suffering and death. There is first a ministry of death, then a ministry of Spirit (2 Corinthians 3).
4. Christ has arrived in this old world and occupied it utterly so that He is not absent—anywhere. He leaves no space for free will and no time for amendment of life. It is now, as Luther once argued and FC VIII repeats, that Christ has an “exalted third mode” of presence, in which our relation to Him is not the issue, but His relation to us, “where they cannot measure or circumscribe him but where they are present to him so that he measures and circumscribes them” (K-W, 610). That is, Luther works the sacramental reversal as it applies to “being there.” Not “How is God present to us?” but “How are we present to God?” Not, “How am I possibly going to devour God inside this little wa-
fer?" but "How is God going to devour me through this little wafer?" Coram deo, not just old coram hominibus.

5. God's way of being present is to be "far, far beyond things created," (above all) and at the same time "deep in and as near to all created things as God is in them." We must speak of two things that offend our old reason: Christ's ubiquity even in His human nature, and two worlds instead of one—one world is old and condemned already, the other new world lives, yet is available only for faith itself and alone. For most this is a monstrous Christology and a fanciful eschatology.

6. And so the present Christ seeks to make peace through ambassadors who do not occupy His place or void but who speak on His behalf so that His enemies will not fear Him. In this way the preaching office and preacher become the womb of Christ.

7. Preachers elect Christ's own sinners by means of the preaching office, which means to be crucified as an old sinner and only then to be raised up as a newly created saint who cannot sin, and of course these exist simultaneously for the time being.

I believe even you good Lutherans can see the problems bursting out at the seams here. But we really don't have a choice in this matter. If we do not work out our understanding of ministry from these assertions—election theologically, bondage anthropologically, the cross soteriologically, the present and ruling Christ christologically, and serving up the gospel unto death ecclesiologically—then, as we know, there is only one other possibility: the understanding of ministry necessarily will be worked out purely and simply according to the law alone. The consequence of that is to have a church where the minister is either master or slave in the old world, rather than slave to Christ alone in the new. A religious ruler over some prescribed territory—school, congregation, synod, metropolis or universal church—or a mere toady of whatever a local church demands or permits of you.

In his Bondage of the Will Luther points to another way, however. He takes Erasmus to task for refusing to abide living in a leper colony all his life. That is, Erasmus wanted the church to improve itself morally, according to the measure of the law or the precepts of the moral life, as he called them. He then gave away the basic theology or gospel in order to get it. Church life, and especially preaching publicly and serving in the ordained ministry, is a life in a leper colony. In that colony one does not seek as a public minister to make the leper colony pure by one's being or signification to the group, nor does one give up
binding up the wounds by deciding to celebrate them and call them something they are not. Neither a nomian nor an antinomian can serve the gospel in the church that is in the old world. In America, neither a re-importation of the divine right of kings nor a capitulation to social contract democracy will do when it comes to the church's worldly life, its old life in this old world. Its polity will need to be the least worst, as polities in the left-hand kingdom are also, and we must enter into how it is that we can massage and disrupt and maneuver in order to get something better than we have now. For it is in the church also that Christ's promise is used by the Spirit to do the favorite work of the Father in heaven, create ex nihilo the new kingdom and its citizens via the preacher's offices of law and gospel.

Notes


3. Indeed, one of its foremost American Lutheran advocates, Robert Jenson, has urged us to read it just that way: “However cautious BEM is in its use of labels, it nevertheless develops a fairly complete doctrine of ordination as sacrament, including a doctrine of the ‘matter’ of this ‘sacramental sign,’ of the res that the signum communicates.” Robert Jenson, Unbaptized God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 49. Compare Melanchthon in the Apology: “The opponents do not consider the priesthood as a ministry of the Word and of the sacraments administered to others. Instead, they consider it as a sacrificial office, as if there ought to be in the New Testament a priesthood similar to the Levitical priesthood, which offers sacrifice for the people and merits the forgiveness of sins for other people. . . . But if ordination is understood with reference to the ministry of the Word, we have no objection to calling ordination a sacrament. For the ministry of the Word has the command of God and has magnificent promises like Romans 1: the gospel ‘is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith’ . . . ’” (Ap. XIII.7, 11; K-W, 220).


8. BEM, Ministry V.A.b.43: “Ordination is a sign performed in faith that the spiritual relationship signified is present in, with and through the words spoken, the
gestures made and the forms employed.


10. For this one could read an account in my Luther for Armchair Theologians (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) or go right to two key sources by Luther: the Smalcald Articles (III.viii) and On the Councils and Churches.


12. Ibid., 219.

13. Luther's way of speaking eschatologically of "two worlds" can be found in the Greater Galatians Commentary (AE 26:8).

14. So Luther says to Erasmus, "As to your fear that many who are inclined to wickedness will abuse this freedom, this should be reckoned as . . . part of that temporal leprosy which has to be endured and that evil which has to be borne. Such people should not be considered so important that in order to prevent their abusing it the Word of God must be taken away" (AE 33:54-55). For a more extended argument here, see my "Law and the Danger of Freedom," Word and World 21/3 (Summer 2001): 270-78.