

Luther on the Ministry

1. No doubt the most important, as well as the most striking, thing about Luther's treatise, "Concerning the Ministry, 1523" (*LW*, 40: 3-44)," is the thoroughgoing consistency with which he argues that "the church is nothing without the Word and everything in it exists by virtue of the Word alone" (11). "[S]ince the church owes its birth to the Word, is nourished, aided and strengthened by [the Word], it is obvious that it cannot be without the Word. If it is without the Word it ceases to be a church" (37). From faith in the Word of God springs the church, and the church through the Word receives and exercises a ministry of the Word, of baptizing and teaching (cf. 38). Accordingly, just as the church itself is constituted solely by the Word, or by faith in the Word, so the only constitutive ministry of the church is the ministry of the Word that is given to the church as such, and thus belongs equally to every Christian. Therefore, while Luther can distinguish several different "functions" of ministry, he is clear that "the first and foremost of all on which everything else depends is the teaching of the Word of God. For we teach with the Word, we consecrate [or administer the sacred bread and wine] with the Word, we bind and absolve sins by the Word, we baptize with the Word, we sacrifice with the Word, we judge all things by the Word" (21; 36). And if he can call a pastor or presbyter or bishop of the church to "teach the Word of God and govern the church" (14), there is not the least question that the only governing of the church he can possibly have in mind is a governing of the church with or by the Word.

2. Luther also makes a strong case for not giving the name "priest" to "those who are in charge of word and sacrament among the people" (35). The New Testament makes clear that this name is properly given to each and every Christian equally (19) and that "better names [*sc.* for representative ministers] would be ministers, deacons, bishops, stewards, presbyters (a name often used and indicating the older members)" (35). It's also clear by implication that Luther anticipates Wesley's relativizing of the traditional distinction between "presbyter" and "bishop." (Cf. especially his reference to those elected by the congregation and certified and commended to it by its leaders by laying on of hands as "bishops, ministers, or pastors" [40]).

3. Of particular interest to me, however, is that Luther can speak indifferently of "teaching" the word of God and "preaching" or "proclaiming" it when speaking of "the first office [or function], that of the ministry of the Word" (21). When he first enumerates "the functions of a priest," it appears as though he intends to mention eight such, of which the first is "to teach the Word of God," while the second is "to preach and proclaim" it. But in the sequel it becomes clear that he means to distinguish only *seven* functions of priesthood (he concludes by referring to "the seventh and last function" [31]) and that the reason for this is that he makes no more than a verbal distinction (or, conceivably, completely omits to explain any more-than-verbal distinction) between teaching the word and preaching it. (Cf. especially the obvious functional equivalence between the two phrases, "the office of teaching" and "the office of preaching the gospel" on 36.) Of course, this is hardly surprising, since the kind of distinction Bultmann later makes between the "direct address" of preaching or proclamation (including administering the sacraments) and the "indirect address" of theology (*sc.* teaching!) reflects a considerable amount of sophistication that one cannot assume Luther to have had. But there is no question—judging, at least, from this treatise—that Luther does not make any conceptual or real distinction between teaching the gospel, or word of God, and preaching it.

4. Another thing of particular interest in this treatise is Luther's way of arguing and defending his case. His sole appeal, finally, is to the word of God, or holy Scripture, which means, crucially, the New Testament (7, 39). I say, "finally," because he does appeal at places to "the common understanding of faith" and even to "the most ancient custom, following the example of the Apostles and their disciples" (37, 39). But, clearly, this is not a final appeal, since he is emphatic in relativizing *all* "human traditions, however sacred and highly regarded," including "the fathers, the councils, tradition, and that strongest article of their [*sc.* the shorn papists'] faith, namely, 'We are many, and thus we hold: therefore it is true'" (7, 24). (In Luther's view, on the contrary, "he does not less err who errs along with many others, nor will he burn less who burns with many" [29].) Interestingly, however, Luther's appeal to scripture, and, specifically, to the New Testament, is an appeal to *apostolic* authority. Thus, in denying that "the New Testament" knows of a priest who is or can be anointed externally, he holds that "[t]here is neither example nor

command nor a simple word in Gospels or Epistles of the apostles in support of this vanity" (19). Similarly, he can characterize his proposal to the Bohemians for appointing their ministers as "this free and apostolic way of establishing a ministry" (41), and he can note "how seldom the Evangelists and Apostles make mention of the Eucharist," while, "on the other hand they ceaselessly emphasize, even to the point of weariness, the ministry of the Word" (25). Another point worth noting about Luther's way of arguing is his characterization of it as a matter of exercising "our reason and Christian liberty"(7 f.).

5. Finally, I cannot fail to be struck by the close parallel between Luther's response to the charge of "innovation" and Bultmann's argument for demythologizing . First off, he rejects the charge, arguing that electing and creating ministers as he proposes that the Bohemians do is so far from being "a new thing and unprecedented" as to be "the most ancient custom, following the example of the Apostles and their disciples"—just as Bultmann, for his part, points to the demythologizing already carried out in the New Testament itself as a precedent for his own (39). But, then, Luther argues that, "even if it were a most recent innovation, if the Word of God here enlightens and commands us, and the need of souls compels it, then the novelty of the thing ought not at all to affect us, but the majesty of the Word"—just as Bultmann justifies his demythologizing program not only, or primarily (but also!) by the need of contemporary souls for a nonmythological understanding of the gospel, but, above all, by the "demand of faith itself."

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