

The Divine Foundation for Ministry

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The *Augsburg Confession* claims that God himself has instituted the office of ministry (AC 5.1). This statement has foundational significance for the church. First and foremost, it means that the Holy Scriptures record how Christ has established this ministry by his word. That word provides the divine mandate for the ministry of the gospel; it gives a secure basis for its existence and its operation. By his word he not only establishes the office and determines its function; by it he also bestows the office on those who are called by God to serve in it and empowers them in their work with his Holy Spirit.

Christ's mandate gives pastors their task and the authority to perform that task in the church. Hence Melancthon asserts in the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* that 'the authority of the ministry depends on the Word of God' (Tr 10). Thus the ministry of the gospel is not valid because of 'any individual's authority but because of the Word given by Christ' (Tr 26). The German translation adds this explanation of Christ's mandate and its importance for the ministers of the word: 'The person adds nothing to this Word and office commanded by Christ. No matter who it is who preaches and teaches, if there are hearts that hear and adhere to it, something will happen to them according as they hear and believe, because Christ commanded such preaching and demanded that his promises be believed.' The context makes it quite clear that when Melancthon refers to the Word of God, he is speaking about the word that institutes the ministry rather than just the word that is preached by its preachers. God's word not only authorises them to preach and teach but also determines what they say.

Secondly, the words of Christ do not just found the office of preaching; since they are the powerful, Spirit-filled, effectual words of God, they empower the office with the Holy Spirit, and those who serve in it too, so that they do the work of God with divine power in and through the office. God has created that office, like all offices, to offer and convey his gifts, his blessings to people through it. Those who serve in it not only serve under the authority of Christ as agents of Christ, they depend on the power of Christ's word and his Holy Spirit as they serve in it. The power for ministry therefore comes from the words of Christ that establish the office and are at work in it, just as the power of baptism comes from the word that institutes it and is used together with the water in it.

Thirdly, Christ's mandate for ministry makes for the certainty and confidence and boldness in a pastor that Paul mentions in Eph 3:11. It means that those who serve faithfully according to that mandate can be sure that God is pleased with their work, for 'God is pleased only with services instituted by his Word and done in faith' (Ap 27.70). By it they 'know that God approves this ministry and is present in it' (Ap 13.12). They can therefore work energetically with a good conscience and wholeheartedly defy Satan when he accuses them of unworthiness and failure. But that can only occur if Christ himself has instituted the office of the ministry and if pastors exercise it according to his word.

As soon as we claim that Christ has instituted the office of ministry, people ask: 'Where, when, and with whom?' Some Lutherans claim that our teaching on ministry is not derived

from any particular passages in the New Testament but is deduced from general theological principles. Others claim that the exalted Christ has instituted the ministry of the word either through the apostles or through prophets in the early church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But that is not what the Lutheran Church has traditionally understood by divine institution. When the Lutheran Confessions speak of the divine institution of the public ministry they speak of its institution by Christ in his earthly ministry. They therefore refer to a number of foundational passages in the New Testament, passages in which he institutes their apostolic ministry.

In their consideration of the public ministry the Lutheran Confessions appeal to the following five texts: John 20:21-23 in AC 28, 6-7; Tr 9, 23, 31;; Luke 10:16 in AC 28, 22; Ap 7/8, 28, 47; Matthew 16:18-19 in Tr 22,25; Matthew 28:19-20 in Tr 31; and John 21:17 in Tr 30. Of these John 20:21-23 is obviously the most significant. In it the risen Lord Jesus gives the mandate for ministry to the apostles and empowers them with his Holy Spirit to perform this ministry together with him. He appoints them as his agents to absolve and retain sin.

The early Lutheran rites for ordination and subsequent Lutheran rites appeal most commonly to Matthew 28:16-20 and John 20:20-23 as Christ's mandate for the office of ministry in the church. They rightly assume that Jesus addresses the apostles in John 20:20-23, just as he does in Matthew 28:16-20. They also assume that Christ's promise to be with his eleven disciples until the close of the age in Matthew 28:20 implies that they are to pass on their commission to others after them. Thus this mandate did not end with the death of the apostles; it continues until the end of time and is carried out by the ministers of the gospel in the church as the successors of the apostles and the representatives of the entire church. Their office is therefore apostolic and ecumenical.

Besides these two passages, both the rite of ordination in the Lutheran Church of Australia and the rite in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* also use 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 as the mandate for the administration of the Lord's Supper by pastors. This passage obviously echoes Luke 22:19-20.

A fourth passage could also be rightly adduced. That is Luke 22:24-30. It is regarded by some exegetes as Luke's account of the ordination of the apostles at his last supper with them. Christ appoints them to 'sit' with him at his table as his royal ministers and 'judge' the twelve tribes of Israel together with him as their minister. They judge the people of God by exercising the office of the keys in their teaching and administration of the Lord's Supper.

Many modern scholars claim that in these passages Christ does not deal with the apostles as ministers of word and sacrament but only as representatives of the church. They therefore conclude that, even though Christ did institute word and sacrament, he did not institute the **ministry** of word and sacrament. It is of course true that the apostles do represent the whole church. It is also true that Christ gives his holy word and his holy supper to the whole church through them (John 17:20). But at the same time the words of Jesus that institute word and sacrament for the apostles, also institute the ministry of word and sacrament in the church. In a discussion on whether the rite of ordination is a sacrament Melancthon therefore concludes: "The church has God's command to appoint preachers and deacons. This is very comforting because we know that God wills to preach and work through men and those chosen by men. Thus it is good that we highly praise and honour this choice,

especially against the devilish Anabaptists who despise and ridicule this choice, together with the preaching office and the physical word' (German Ap 13, 12-13).

It is most significant and instructive that Christ did not institute the office of the ministry as something that existed by itself and operated in its own right. Rather, when he instituted this office, he also at the same time established the church, commissioned the apostles by his Holy Spirit as the ministers of his word in the church, and gave the sacraments as his gifts to the church. These essential interconnections shows us that the ministry of word and sacrament is not meant to exist apart from its agents, its beneficiaries, the divine service and its divine author. We can distinguish each of these from the others, but we can never separate them. They are all interrelated parts of the same package. We do not have the ministry of word and sacrament apart from its ministers, their divine authorisation, the congregational assembly, and Christ himself with his presence in it.