

The Office of the Spirit

Logia Forum 35:3

One of my former colleagues at our seminary used to warn his students about the fuzzy use of language. In part, he had in mind their use of fashionable, undefined terms and the all too common tendency to turn particular concrete nouns into vague general abstractions.

An example of this is the still popular Protestant reference each and every kind of church work as ministry. This has led to the slogan that was picked up in many congregational mission statements: 'Every member a minister' and the challenge that was addressed to each of them with the question, 'What is your ministry?' This generic notion of ministry gave voice to a rather misguided anticlericalism and ill-informed activism with all their ungodly consequences. With that way of thinking and speaking three important Biblical truths were sidelined — the teaching about divinely established orders for human life on earth, the teaching about the station and vocation of Christians in these orders, and the teaching about the divinely instituted office of ministry in the church that Luther mentions in his introduction to the Table of Duties in the Small Catechism. In that climate of opinion which mirrors the subjective, neo-gnostic mentality that is as prevalent in the church as in our society no office could possibly convey the Holy Spirit. The means of grace could not be the means of the Spirit.

Now I do not wish to provide a Biblical critique of that theology here, let alone discuss Luther's take on this issue. Many others have done that much better than I can. But I would like to call your attention to Luther's implicit correction of these notions in his German version of the New Testament. There he carefully distinguishes the work of pastorate from the work of the laity with his nuanced translation of Greek word *diakonia* which English versions, since the KJV, usually translate by 'ministry', or 'service' as a synonym for it. But In his commentary on Ephesians Tom Winger rejects this understanding. He notes that in the New Testament *diakonia* does not describe all kinds of work but only the work done by 'a delegated representative of someone in authority to carry out specifically mandated tasks of behalf of his superior' (page 464). Luther supports his claim. While he usually translates this term by 'service,' German *Dienst*, for the work the laity together with God in their station and vocation, he translates it by 'office,' German *Amt*, where it refers quite specifically to the work of apostles and pastors. This technical term, which is derived from Latin, is quite correctly defined in my English dictionary as 'a position of duty, trust, or authority'.

In keeping with this official understanding of 'ministry' Luther takes it to refer to 'the office of the word' that was first entrusted to the apostles (Acts 6:4). It is therefore 'the office of apostleship' that was given by Jesus (Acts 1:16, 25). As an apostle Paul refers to it as 'the office' that he had received from the risen Lord Jesus (Acts 20:24; 1 Tim 1:12). It was 'his office' as the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 21:19; Rom 11:13).

Paul exercised 'the office' of ministry in the congregation at Corinth together with Timothy (2 Cor 4:1). There his use of 'we' recalls the mention of Timothy in 2 Corinthians 1:1 as the co-author of the letter. It was 'the office for the administration of the New Testament' (2

Cor 3:6). Whereas Moses and his successors in the Old Testament held 'the office' that sentenced transgressors to death by the proclamation of damnation (2 Cor 3:7, 9), the office of the New Testament was 'the office of the Spirit...that gives life' (2 Cor 3:6), 'the office that conveys the Spirit' (2 Cor 3:8). It is 'the office that preaches justification' rather than damnation (2 Cor 3:9). It is therefore 'the office that preaches reconciliation' (2 Cor 5:18). Thus both Paul as an apostle and Timothy as a pastor have the same office as ambassadors of Christ. So much so that Paul speaks of it as 'our office' (2 Cor 6:3). Even though they differ in their vocation, God has entrusted them both with the same office, the office of the word for the proclamation of the gospel and its bestowal of the life-giving Spirit.

But the participation in that office is not just restricted to those who are coworkers with an apostle, such as Timothy with Paul (2 Tim 4:5). It is extended to other pastors as well, such as Archippus (Col 4:17), even though they do not do the work of an apostle but the work of 'an evangelical preacher' (2 Tim 4:5). Whether they have been called to be apostles, or prophets, or evangelists, or pastors, or teachers, they are all ministers of the word who do the work the same 'office' that builds up the body of Christ as his holy temple (Eph 4:11-12). Their callings differ but the office is the same.

Through the office that they occupy, pastors therefore work together with the risen Lord Jesus as his spokesmen and under his authority in their proclamation of God's word. The power of their proclamation of justification and reconciliation does not depend of them but on the office that they exercise in keeping with Christ's mandate for it. Through them in that office the risen Lord Jesus conveys his life-giving Holy Spirit to the congregation of the saints in the divine service. Their office is the office of the Spirit.

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