

# Church and Ministry

by The Rev. Dr. Charles P. Arand

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The Lutheran Confession of Church and Ministry rests upon the presupposition that the believer lives in two distinct but inseparable relationships. God's word of Gospel establishes our relationship with God; God's design for life regulates our relationship with others. Church and Ministry in Lutheran theology also rests upon the nature of the Word since the Church is a creature of the Word and ministry of the Church is given the task of delivering that word.

## The Church Lives In Two Relationships

The Lutheran confessional writings draw a direct connection between the justification of the sinner (AC IV) and the definition of the Church (AC VII). As it is with the believer, so it is also with the Church as an assembly of believers. So just as the individual Christian lives in two dimensions, so the Church also lives in two inseparable yet distinct dimensions (Ap VII, 5). In relation to God (*coram deo*) the Church lives from the Word of God; in relation to other human creatures (*coram mundo*) the Church lives to deliver the Word of God to others.

## The Church In Relation to God (*coram deo*)

As the Spirit creates faith in the Gospel He brings them to and gathers them around Jesus Christ. This in relation to God (*coram deo*) the Church lives as an assembly of believers, a gathering of those who believe the Gospel. As the believer is righteous by faith in Christ, so the Church as the assembly of believers is holy and without blemish in Christ (Ap VII, 7; LC II, 48-49). Thus the ungodly are not a part of the Church. As a gathering ruled by Christ and created by the Spirit; the Church exists throughout the world and throughout all times (AC VII,

10; LC II, 51). As an assembly of believers, the Church remains hidden to human eyes. Only God can see who belongs to the Church because only He can see the faith that exists in people's hearts. [Walther, *Theses on the Church*, I–III, IX].

At the same time, the Church is not a “platonic republic” (Ap VII, 20) any more than the believer’s righteousness in Christ is a “legal fiction.” The Church truly exists even as the believer is truly righteous, because it is a creature of the Word. Luther describes the church in the *Smalcald Articles* simply as sheep who hear the Shepherd’s voice. He expresses it more fully in the *Large Catechism*, “everything in this Christian community is so ordered that everyone may daily obtain forgiveness of sins through Word and Sacrament” (LC II, 55).

## The Church in Relation to the World (*coram mundo*)

Even though the assembly of believers remains hidden from human view, this does not mean that the Church cannot be located within the world (*coram mundo*). God has established (*de jure divino*) the proclamation of the Word, a proclamation that takes place within the world. The Word then not only creates the Church (*coram deo*), it also identifies where the Church can be found with the midst of human society (*coram mundo*). The Word in all its forms (oral, written, sacramental) is thus the divinely instituted mark that identifies those to whom the gift of salvation is delivered (even if it does not identify all those who actually receive it in faith). The Church (*coram deo* or *coram mundo*) is not Church apart from these divinely instituted marks. [Walther, *Theses on the Church*, V, VII, VIII].

The Church can be identified *coram mundo* not only by the delivery of the word, but in a secondary way by those humanly established (*de jure humano*) activities and structures that flow from the Word and are developed to convey that Word into human lives. These include among other things: the Church’s public teachings and catechesis, its ritual in worship, and its

community life. In so far as these orders deliver the Word and flow from the Word, they may be considered by extension marks of the Church (*coram mundo*). In one sense, it doesn't matter how one structures the Church whether it be with an episcopacy, church superintendents, a bottom-up congregational polity, city councils, or princes. For as an assembly of believers created and gathered by the Word the Church truly exists in whatever institutional forms as constituted to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ [Walther, *Theses on the Church*, VI].

## Ministry Within Our Two-fold Relationship

Early in the Reformation it was necessary to stress, in light of the doctrine of justification, that there was no distinction *coram deo* between the spiritual estate and the secular estate. In the late Middle Ages, it was argued that the priest had been given a special quality that enable him to do things no others could do. His standing before God gave him special standing over his parishioners; his power to dispense God's grace gave him special power over them. Luther came to realize that the power of God is expressed through the Word, not through priests who had attained a special spiritual status. All Christians hold in common the gifts that flow from justification. And so, there is no spiritual distinction among the people of God.

Having broken through the secular-spiritual estate distinction, Luther recovered the value of vocation for life here on Earth. He stressed that in our horizontal relationships (*coram mundo*) God has structured the human life to be lived in three situations; home (family and economic activities), the political realm, and the Church. In each of these walks of life people are given "offices" or responsibilities that Christians recognize as callings or vocations from God for the good of creation. Consistent with the callings and stations where God has placed them in daily life, Christians are given the additional task of confessing the name of Christ (bringing the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins of others) by virtue of their baptism.

As God has ordered each of the horizontal spheres of human life (magistrate-citizen, parent-child) so He has ordered the Church (pastor-parishioner) over and against the radicals who didn't like any of the estates (marriage, civil government, priest.) Luther and the Confessions stress that for the proper ordering of the Church *coram mundo* God has established the special priesthood (within the midst of the common priest.) Luther viewed it as a gift from God, a special place of service to which some are called to make possible the formal and public use of God's saving Word. The Church has the command to appoint ministers (Ap XIII, 12; Treatise 69; LW 37-364) [Walther, *Theses on the Ministry*, I-III, VII].

God has entrusted the ministry of the Word to the common priesthood and the special priesthood. Each uses the Word, but in different settings. To play them off against each other is to confuse the two spheres of relationship and the mutual service in and through the word. This occurs when personal authority and talk of rights dominate the conversation about the ministry, be it common or special, then problems on get worse. Pastor is a servant of God's command and of God's peoples' needs. The people offer respect to the office on account of God's institution and for the Word delivered to them [Walther, *Theses on the Pastoral Office*, IX, X; *Resolution 3-06A* from 1992].

## Public Ministry of the Word

Even as the confessors stressed that God had instituted a specific office within the common priesthood, they emphasized that the pastor who filled that office did so by serving in a specific way, as the agent of God's forgiving and re-creating Word. The public ministry of the Church is inextricably linked with God's tools for creating faith. Melancthon defines the service of the Word as follows; "The power of the keys or the power of the bishops is the power of God's mandate to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer the Sacraments" (AC

XXVIII, 5). Pastors are to apply word faithfully and aptly to God's people. Pastors are not responsible for converting anyone, the Spirit does that through the Word when and where He pleases. [Walther, *Theses on the Pastoral Office*, V].

What God has given (*de jure divino*) the pastor to do (preach the Gospel, administer the Sacraments) must be distinguished from what human beings assign (*de jure humano*) the pastor to do (this is the burden of AC XXVIII). The congregation may ask the pastor to carry out other responsibilities alongside the responsibility proclaiming the Word. A congregation may authorize him to lead them in strategic planning, administration, counseling, vision setting, hiring, setting a budget, and the like. Most often, these responsibilities are determined by the Church in the specific situations, times, and places in which it lives. These matters belong to the realm of adiaphora.

## Call from Common Priesthood into Special Priesthood

The common priesthood carries out its responsibility in part by calling someone from its midst to serve in the priesthood. To be sure, all Christians are priests in the sense that they are born of water and the Spirit, and any could carry out the public functions—to baptize, preach, celebrate the Lord's Supper, to bind/lose sins, to sacrifice (offer up praise in worship), pray for others, and judge doctrine (LW 40:33-34). Yet Christians do not usurp the public office by claiming individual right. There is the community to consider. “Publicly, one may not exercise a right without the consent of the whole body of the Church” (LW 40:34). This is the point of AC XIV. And so the common priesthood has the responsibility by virtue of baptism of filling the public office of the special priesthood. [Walther, *Theses on the Church*, IV; *Theses on the Pastoral Office*, VIa–VII].

Those who are called to serve in the special priesthood must “be apt to teach.” This was especially important to the reformers who defined the ministry in terms of delivering the Word. The point of *rite vocatus* was to use whatever established procedures were in place so long as the Gospel was getting out. One could be “rightly called” (*rite vocatus*) in various ways. The reformers generally insisted that three things occur: examination, call, and ordination. Examination signaled to congregations that candidates were aligned with evangelical theology. The call signaled to a man that a congregation was willing to receive him as a pastor. Ordination was a rite celebrated to mark the coming of the one called. [Walther, *Theses on the Pastoral Office*, VIb]. Any particular structure could always be revamped if necessary. After all, those structures are there to serve the Gospel.

The Lutheran Confessions recognize certain “emergency” situations. Emergencies or exceptional circumstances occur when a pastor cannot be obtained. In such situations the people cannot be denied God’s Word. Thus “in time of emergency, each may use it as he deems best” (LW 40:34). The “Treatise of the Power and Primacy of the Pope” also affirms that in cases of necessity each Christian has the right to baptize and publicly to declare the forgiveness of sins. At the time the Treatise was written, bishops had stopped ordaining Lutheran candidates. But the churches could not go without pastors, so they ordained their own candidates.