

The Priesthood of Believers, the Office of Ministry and Ordination in the Works of the Later Luther

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The purpose of this seminar was to evaluate the interpretation – e.g., of Karl Holl (1866-1926) and Wilhelm Pauck (1901-1981) – that the Later Luther, perhaps under the influence of Melancthon, abandoned his earlier “congregationalist” views regarding the call to the office of public ministry. To this end, relevant sections of the “Book of Concord” and “Luthers Werke” were investigated. Examples of the Early Luther on this subject were culled from “That a Christian assembly or congregation has the right and power to judge all teaching and to call, appoint and dismiss teachers, established and proven by Scripture” and “Concerning the ministry” (both 1523). As for the Later Luther, the seminar paid particular attention to texts from 1535-1539, including passages from the “Formula ordinatio-nis” (WA 38, 423-433) and “Von den Konziliis und Kirchen” (WA 50, 624-653 ≅ Am 41, 143-178).

Determining the possibility of “the influence of Melancthon” was tricky business and a good place to begin. Hence, the confessional claims and principles of CA 5 and CA 14 were investigated. These two key articles – “De ministerio ecclesiastico” and “De ordine ecclesiastico” – were explored in order to become familiar with Melancthon’s words – given official status at Augsburg – regarding “ministerio” and “ordine,” if not also “ecclesiastico.” In regard to CA 5, it was noted that the Latin makes clear that faith is obtained through “docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta,” while the German makes clear that “solchen Glauben zu erlangen, hat Gott das predigamt eingesetzt, Evangelium und Sakrament gegeben ...” Also noted as basic to the “Augustana’s” understanding of the ministry of the church was the condemnation of the Anabap-

tist notion that faith comes through internal preparations and works apart from the external Word.

When CA 14 was considered, it was noted that the brevity of this article is perhaps part of the reason why there appears to be such little present agreement among Lutherans concerning issues related to ordination. That is, CA 14’s simple assertion that public teaching, preaching, and administration of the sacraments shall not take place “without a regular call,” while saying it all, perhaps does not say enough. In other words, it is around those words “regular call” (“ordentlichen Beruf,” “rite vocatus”) that much of the present confusion, disagreement, and perhaps also mischief revolve.

To gain additional understanding, the seminar turned to Apologia 14. Here, particular attention was devoted to Melancthon’s contention that the Lutherans had given “frequent testimony in the assembly [Reichstag] to our deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy” and his declaration that the Lutherans were willing “to keep the ecclesiastical and canonical polity.” As such, these two passages from Apologia 14 seem to indicate a clear willingness on the part of the reformers to maintain the status quo in regard to the ordering of the office of ministry.

However, further inspection of Apologia 14 showed that Melancthon, although he professed a desire to keep church order the same on the one hand, provided on the other hand a significant challenge to the Roman understanding of “order” as well as of “church”: namely, (1) that the various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy were “created by human authority” by the early Fathers for “good and useful reasons” and (2) that

the church is only present among those who »rightly teach the Word of God and administer the sacraments« and not »among those who seek to destroy the Word of God with their edicts«. It was noted that when taken in context, Melanchthon's willingness to maintain the ranks and hierarchy served a practical if not also a polemical purpose. According to Apologia 14, such willingness would only be declared »provided that the bishops stop raging against our churches« and that »this willingness will be our defense ... against the charge that we have undermined the authority of the bishops«.

Indeed, as was pointed out, the assertion that Luther's colleague advocated swallowing whole the existing hierarchical framework can not be sustained in light of Melanchthon's »Treatise on the power & primacy of the pope« (1537). In this treatise – properly considered the belated »Article 29« of the Augustana – Melanchthon clearly provided additional qualifications (to say the least) to the Roman conception of ecclesiastical rank. According to Melanchthon, the power to preach, administer the sacraments, absolve sins, etc., belongs to »all who preside over the churches whether they are called pastors, presbyters or bishops«. Furthermore, bishops »who have wrested jurisdiction from the pastors and tyrannically exercise it alone« should not be recognized as bishops. Add to this notion Melanchthon's complete repudiation of the rank of pope in favor of the conciliar model, and it becomes difficult to contend that Melanchthon sought to maintain the existing system of church governance »as is«. Finally, given Luther's own words regarding the papacy in the »Smalcald articles« – which Melanchthon had read just two months before penning his treatise on papal power – it was asked »Who was influencing whom?»

It was noted that it has become popular to cite Melanchthon – rather than Luther, sometimes even contra Luther – in regard to questions concerning ordination. For instance, regarding the possibility of a sacramental understanding of ordination, a 1983 Lutheran World Federation

committee report was cited in which it was asserted that Lutherans do not reject a sacramental understanding of ordination. In support of this assertion, the report quoted Apologia 13: »If ordination is interpreted in relation to the ministry of the Word, we have no objection to calling ordination a sacrament« nor »to calling the laying on of hands a sacrament«. However, inspection of the entire article revealed that the passage is a rhetorical device (*reductio ad absurdum*) in effect proving the evangelical point regarding what is and is not a sacrament. That is, if the priesthood is interpreted »in reference to the ministry of the Word or the administration of the [two] sacraments«, rather than in reference to a Levitical order offering sacrifices »to merit the forgiveness of sins«, then ordination might be considered a sacrament. In other words, according to Apologia 13, the Roman Church must first dispense with its understanding of the function of the priesthood in favor of the evangelical understanding; only then would the reformers consider considering ordination a sacrament.

The LWF report highlighted an important concern in present dialogue (and demagoguery) regarding ordination: Does ordination convey something *essential* – that is, transmit something that becomes an indelible part of the recipient's *nature* – in the manner of Baptism or the Lord's Supper? Or is ordination »merely functional« – that is, simply the commending to and granting of a particular office – not *substantia* but *accidens*?

With the opposite poles represented by the two above questions in mind, the seminar participants turned to part three of Luther's »Von den Konziliis und Kirchen« (1539). In this work, Luther enumerated the seven signs by which one may »externally« recognize the church, including the (fifth) sign: »das sie Kirchen diener weihet oder berufft oder empter hat, die sie bestellen sol...« (WA 50, 632, 35 f). Much lively discussion was devoted to the manner in which Luther regarded these »holy possessions« of the church – that is: The Word, Baptism, Lord's Supper, Absolution, Ministerial Office, Prayer & Praise, and

Persecution. Seminar participants zeroed in on Luther's statements declaring that through these signs the Holy Spirit sanctifies and vivifies believers in Christ »nach der ersten tafel Mosi« and suggesting that these seven signs might even be understood as seven sacraments (642, 32 - 643, 6). Yes, Luther said, the Holy Spirit also sanctifies via the second table of the Law, but since the heathens also practice the works outlined in the second table, the possessions belonging to the higher, holier, first table are preferred, since they issue from and in faith in Christ (643, 27-37).

At stake in this discussion was whether the calling of pastors, et al., is the work of God alone (first table) or a work which requires human cooperation (second table). That is, is the vocation of pastor a »holier« vocation than the vocations of citizen, family member, and worker purported by Luther to be »second table« vocations? If so, is it possible to distinguish between the *office of ministry* as a »holy possession« and divine work necessary for communicating Word and Sacrament, and the *office-holder* as a second-table sinner, a regular Joe, upon whom ordination confers no innate powers? On the other hand, it was asked, is it possible – in regard to Luther's writings on the subject – to be so wary of the »spiritual« conception of the office-holder to the point where the office of ministry itself becomes »purely political«?

Conscious of the two poles suggested by the first-table / second table configuration, other passages from Luther's later works were considered, including this line from an Ordinationsrede in late 1535: »In the church, sensible ordinations with their ceremonies are necessary« (»Scientis ordinationem ecclesiae cum suis ritibus necessariam esse«, WA 41, 762, 18). In the end, the question came to be rendered in terms of the English-language idiom of »Big-O« versus »little-o« – that is, did Luther have in mind »Ordination« or simply »ordination«? Of course, an easy

answer to the question proved elusive since in the German texts the noun is capitalized and in the Latin it remains lower case!

Finally, the historical data regarding the manner in which evangelical churches »ordained« their pastors was considered. The thesis behind this investigation was as follows: Luther, including the Later Luther, had a degree of influence upon the context and conduct of ordination in the 1530's, 1540's, and beyond. Therefore, the following question was entertained: »How did others aligned with Luther's program understand the call to public preaching, teaching and administering the sacraments?« A thoroughgoing answer to this question, it was believed, would support rather than contradict the manner in which the Later Luther understood the priesthood of all believers, ministerial office, and ordination. On this question, the seminar's leader presented detailed historical data regarding the understanding and exercise of »ordination« within 16th century evangelical communities (cf. James M. Kittelson: *Historical and systematic theology in the mirror of church history: the lessons of »ordination« in sixteenth-century Saxony*. ChH 71 [2002], 743-774). This data appeared to suggest that, for the early Lutherans, ordination tended to occur more out of a need for order – including secular order – than out of need to convey ecclesiastical charisms.

Whether as climax or denouement, the seminar concluded with the consideration of the EKD document, »Kirchengemeinschaft nach evangelischen Verständnis«. In this »Protestant understanding of ecclesial communion« seminar participants encountered a »real-time« struggle with the issues and an application of the principles discussed in the seminar. In this document, the distinction between the Lutheran understanding of ordination and the Roman understanding rests not upon *whether* or *whither* ordination, but upon *which* ordination.