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MINISTRATORES VERBI IN FIDEM REMISSIONIS

GOSPEL AND MINISTRY IN LUTHER'S

WRITINGS TO 1520

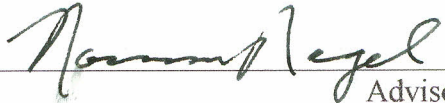
A Seminar Paper presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematic Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Sacred Theology.

by

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May 1996

Approved by


Advisor



CONTENTS

Scope and Argument	1
Priesthood and Hierarchy in Luther's Writings Before 1517	4
<i>The Dictata</i>	4
The Lectures on Hebrews	6
Priest and Absolution in the Indulgence Controversy	10
The 95 Theses and the Explanations	10
<i>"Pro veritate"</i> (1518)	14
Saying It in German: <i>Sermon on Penance</i> (1519)	20
Christian Priesthood in the 1520 Writings	27
<i>The Freedom of a Christian</i>	27
<i>To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation</i>	31
<i>The Babylonian Captivity of the Church</i>	33
A Concluding Word, and Directions for Further Study	36
Bibliography	38

SCOPE AND ARGUMENT

The scope of this study is explicitly and intentionally (and hence, perhaps, artificially) limited to Luther's early writings, up to and including the milestone works of 1520. It will seek to pay attention to detail, but makes no claim of being exhaustive. We will explore how Luther came to confess the gospel when speaking about the office of the holy ministry. Or, to put the question another way, what happened to the doctrine and vocabulary of the ministry when the gospel began to make itself heard in Luther's thinking, teaching, and preaching?

As we attempt an answer to such questions, it must be remembered that we will not be hearing all that Luther had to say on the matter of the ministry in the church. Indeed, none of his ideas were "full grown" by 1520. His assertion of the priesthood of all Christians and of the rights and authority of the Christian congregation reached its high-water mark in 1523, with the publication of *Concerning the Ministry*¹ and *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*.² Luther later came into conflict with the *Schwärmer*, and after 1530 the hope of

¹Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., gen eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Fortress Press) 40:7-44. Hereafter cited *LW*.

²*LW* 39:305-314.

reconciliation with Rome was abandoned; these developments led Luther to concentrate more on the order and structure of evangelical church life.³ But all that must wait for another study; the present paper confines itself to the ways in which the gospel began to make itself heard as Luther spoke about the ministry in the earliest phases of his career.

It has been asserted that the main development in Luther's earliest writings, at least in terms of the doctrine of the ministry, was the concept of the priesthood of all believers.⁴ According to this view, we might call Luther through 1520 the "merely Protestant Luther," who championed an individualistic faith, minimized the role of the sacraments, discarded all distinction between clergy and laity, and asserted the right of every believer to be his own priest. This "Protestant Luther" is still very popular, even among many Lutherans, but he does not happen to be the real Luther, not even the real Luther before 1520 (and certainly not thereafter). The exclusive focus on Luther's concept of the priesthood of all Christians is at best a drastic over-simplification, and often results in a very serious distortion of Luther's real views.⁵

What we intend to show in this study is that the view just described ignores a vital element in Luther's writings up to 1520, namely his emphasis on the absolution

³For Luther's development later in his life one needs to consider the anti-enthusiast writings such as *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (LW 40:79-223), as well as documents aimed at restoring a well-ordered church life based on the Reformation doctrine, such as *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony* (LW 40:269-320). Cf. Also Martin Brecht, ed., *Martin Luther und das Bischofsamt*. Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1990.

⁴So, e.g. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 183.

⁵In a very helpful article tucked away in an unexpected place, Robert H. Fischer rebutted such "pernicious nonsense." "Baptists and Ministry: Luther on the Priesthood of All Believers." *The Baptist Quarterly*, 17 (July 1958):293-311.

spoken by the priest in the sacrament of penance. Luther came to see that word of absolution as a point of objective certainty for the comfort of the Christian, because it operates by the sure promise of Christ. Far from throwing the believer back on the strength or quality of his own faith (as is sometimes alleged⁶), Luther rather directs the believer's attention outside his own heart and bids him to accept the judgment of another (the priest), who acts as Christ's appointed agent and forgives sins by His authority. The externalness of absolution was a decisive turning point for Luther. It was here that Luther first encountered Christ as the gracious Other who binds our faith to his word of forgiveness. It might overstate the case to describe Luther's focus on Christ's promise of forgiveness in the absolution as *the* decisive breakthrough as the gospel invaded his theology, yet in absolution the gospel did come clear — and that at a time when Luther still regarded Christ on the cross primarily as *Exemplar*, and discussed baptism mainly in terms of the process of killing the sinful nature and gradually purifying the soul. Absolution spoke the gospel for Luther in a way that was to remain with him throughout his life,⁷ and was a theological key which released him from the inescapable subjective uncertainty of his early *theologia crucis*.

⁶For example, Barbara Hallensleben argues that Cajetan was right to reject "*die reflexive Gewißheit über den eigenen Gnadenstand*." "»Das heisst eine neue Kirche bauen« Kardinal Cajetans Antwort auf die reformatorische Lehre von der Rechtfertigungsgewißheit." *Catholica*, 39 (1985), 218.

⁷Consider here the great work *The Keys* (1530), *LW* 40:321-377, and his last treatise, *Against the Roman Papacy, An Institution of the Devil* (1545), *LW* 41:315-376. Cf. Peter Manns, *Martin Luther: An Illustrated Biography*. (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 42.

PRIESTHOOD AND HIERARCHY IN LUTHER'S WRITINGS BEFORE 1517

The *Dictata*⁸

Luther's references to the Christian ministry in his first lectures on the Psalms can generally be described as conventional for late medieval exegesis. Applying the expository method of the *Quadrige* in which he had been trained, Luther takes the literal sense to be referring to Christ, and the allegorical sense as relating to the church. He thus relates details of various Psalms to bishops and priests. In his comments on Psalm 66, the various leaders of the church are identified with the various animal sacrifices: "bulls" are the contemplative and the preachers, "rams" are prelates whose work especially concentrates on the sacraments, and the "goats" are those in the active life who are characterized by their works of penitence.⁹ Similarly, when commenting on Psalm 69:3 ("My eyes fail, looking for my God."), Luther connects the "eyes" with bishops. It is characteristic of the *Dictata* (as of other late medieval reform movements) that Luther's criticism concentrates on the bishops' venality and selfishness rather than on any false doctrine.

Allegorically, the eyes of Christ are the studious and contemplative people in the church, those who meditate in the Law of the Lord day and night (Ps. 1:2), those who guide others, especially the bishops, who ought to lead a life committed to both. . . . Some are devoted to gain, some to pleasures, some to ambition, many even to the laws and traditions of men, and not a few to the study of Aristotle. Because all of these are deserting the study of the divine Word, the eyes of Christ

⁸*LW* 10 & 11; *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-), 55 *passim*. Hereafter cited *WA*.

⁹*LW* 10:320f.

in the church.¹⁰

The main requirement of priests and bishops was that they conform to the example of Christ. This is how Luther explains Psalm 45: “All this is to be done by the example of Christ.”¹¹ Such imitation of Christ’s example involves carrying out their office (namely, “to rule and have charge over the church”) in truth, meekness, and righteousness. “Therefore those who climb or are chosen to offices and care of souls should be such people, so that **it could be said to them as to Christ** (to whose image they should conform): ‘With your comeliness . . .’”¹² In his comments on Psalm 84 Luther identifies those who rule the church with Christ: “Any bishop is a vicar of Christ and a mystical head and a mystical Christ.”¹³ As Christ is Example for the bishops and priests, so the clergy are to be examples for the people. The functions of teaching, preaching, interceding, sacrificing, judging, and so forth are all involved in the office of bishops and priests, since Christ also does all these things: the priest imitates Christ by doing what Christ does. The characteristic summary of all these duties comes under the rubric of “ruling” together with Christ, as lords and princes rule together with a king. “As the king has tablemates at his banquets who sit with him, and these are his counselors, princes, judges, etc., so in the church Christ has bishops, popes, rulers of churches, who

¹⁰*LW* 10:359.

¹¹*LW* 10:222.

¹²*LW* 10:223, emphasis added.

¹³*LW* 11:143.

sit on their seats in judgment . . .”¹⁴

It may be argued that this understanding of priesthood and hierarchy conforming to the example of (and being identified with) Christ was largely a result of Luther’s use of the four-fold sense as the exegetical method for the *Dictata*. What is literally predicated of Christ must be allegorically applied to the church and its leaders, just as it is then also tropologically applied to the individual person.

The Lectures on Hebrews¹⁵

Luther’s lectures on Hebrews, delivered in 1517-1518, also emphasize the same idea of the priest being conformed to the example and pattern of Christ. “The apostle commends the two things in Christ that should shine forth in every priest according to the example of Christ, namely, that he should be merciful to the people and faithful to God for the people.”¹⁶ Again, “the apostle evidently wants us to imitate Christ, who suffered and by dying crossed over to the glory of the Father.”¹⁷ Christ’s passion and death are applied to the inner dying of the believer to sin, and the figure of entering the sanctuary by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:19) “is the sacrament of the imitation of Christ Therefore the suffering of Christ’s flesh, His death and removal, is the sacrament of the slaying of the conscience.”¹⁸ The priest, like every Christian, is to be occupied with being

¹⁴LW 11:291.

¹⁵LW 29:107-241; WA 57/3:97-238.

¹⁶LW 29:142.

¹⁷LW 29:224.

¹⁸LW 29:224-225.

conformed to “this mystical and exemplary suffering of Christ.”

The difference between priest and layman, according to Luther in these lectures, is basically a difference of degree of personal sanctity. Commenting on Hebrews 7:12 (“when the priesthood is changed . . .”), Luther asserts, “In the new law a priest does not differ from the people in the matter of vestments or attire but rather because of his outstanding sanctity and righteousness . . . the only thing that makes a difference among Christians is sin, which pollutes the conscience.”¹⁹ In other words, there really are two classes of Christians, clergy and laity, distinguished by the extent to which they have progressed in righteousness.²⁰

Luther does repeatedly emphasize that the priesthood is to be characterized by mercy toward the people rather than harshness, and by service rather than selfishness. “Therefore all priests should imitate this Priest [Christ] and know that they are not priests for themselves but for others, in order that they may bear the iniquities of others.”²¹

With respect to this very thing priests are reminded that, beyond other Christians, they are anointed on their fingers, not so much for the purpose of being worthy to touch the sacrament of the body of Christ as to deal gently with the matter [*res*] of the same sacrament, that is, with the people of Christ.²²

Luther also makes an attempt to distinguish the “office” of the episcopate from

¹⁹LW 29:192.

²⁰It will clarify this point to compare this “difference among Christians” statement with another made by Luther only a couple of years later, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520): “the sole difference between him [a priest] and a layman is his ministry.” LW 36:117. Whereas in the Hebrews lectures clergy and laity were distinguished by what they are, Luther later understood the distinction based on what each had been *given*.

²¹LW 29:169.

²²LW 29:170.

the “dignity,”²³ in an effort to focus attention on the service to be rendered to others rather than on the status or rank one enjoys with the office.

In one place Luther’s comments seem to reflect the controversy in which he was embroiled during these lectures, and a new note is sounded that will become more and more central. Elaborating on the verse already mentioned about the change in the priesthood, Luther quotes Peter Lombard regarding the difference in the sacraments of the old law, which did not justify, and those of the new law, which give grace. The difference, Luther concludes, is that the sacraments in the church have the promise of Christ: the specific promise he quotes is Matthew 18:18, “Whatever you bind on earth, this shall also be bound in heaven, . . .” For just a moment, before returning to his former way of talking, Luther is prodded by this verse of Scripture (with which he was also energetically engaged at the time because of the indulgence controversy) to see Christ “as the One who promises the remission of sins and cleanness of heart through the word of His priest [i.e., in absolution]. He who believes him is altogether righteous and clean before God.”²⁴ The promise of Christ, and the totality of the righteousness of the one who believes him, momentarily cast what the priest does in a very new light: “Properly speaking, therefore, it is not the office of the new priest to teach the Law but to point out the grace of Jesus Christ, which is the fulfillment of the Law.”²⁵ As soon as the focus is

²³*LW* 29:173.

²⁴*LW* 29:193. The ambiguity about the object of “believe” — is it Christ or the priest? — seems to be original with Luther: “. . . *per verbum sacerdotis sui, cui qui credit . . .*” *WA* 57/3:192.

²⁵*LW* 29:194.

no longer on Christ alone, however, the clarity fades, and the meager, incipient nature of man's spiritual progress distracts our attention:

But this change has not yet been carried out, as the previous one was; but it is being carried out from day to day. Therefore the new priest partly teaches, partly points along with John the Baptist, since in this time that righteous man for whom the Law has not been laid down makes no more than a beginning.²⁶

²⁶*Ibid.*

PRIEST AND ABSOLUTION IN THE INDULGENCE CONTROVERSY

The 95 Theses²⁷ and the Explanations²⁸

The controversy about indulgences was largely a dispute about the sacrament of penance, and in particular the third part of sacramental penance, satisfaction. Starting from the point of his early *theologia crucis* with its emphasis on the salvific paradigm of the cross in the life of the believer, Luther was concerned that indulgences would deprive Christians of the very means by which sin would be gradually killed and driven out, namely sufferings and crosses. This is why Luther was concerned to restrict the pope's power to remit punishments to those he himself had imposed, thus leaving the real, divine, beneficial punishments in place "until our entrance into the kingdom of heaven."²⁹ There can be no remission of guilt without *humilitas*, which directly involves the Christian in submission to the satisfactions and works of penance prescribed by the priest.³⁰ In this connection the priest is called God's "vicar," and humble submission to the priest is the condition for remission of guilt: "*Nulli prorsus remittit deus culpam, quin*

²⁷LW 31:17-33; WA 1:233-238.

²⁸LW 31:83-252; WA 1:529-628.

²⁹Thesis 4, LW 31:26.

³⁰Thesis 7.

simul eum subiiciat humiliatum in omnibus sacerdoti suo vicario.” The office of the clergy, whether priest, bishop, or curate, is thus cast in terms of “power,” *potestas*. “*Qualem potestatem habet papa in purgatorium generaliter, talem habet quilibet Episcopus et Curatus in sua diocesi et parochia specialiter.*”³¹ The priests are faulted for wrongly exercising this power, namely by converting canonical penalties to penalties of purgatory, thus confusing human sentences with divine punishments.³² Although the whole debate actually centered on the sacrament of penance, there is surprisingly little emphasis in the 95 Theses on absolution as such, except the remark that in former times it used to follow rather than precede satisfaction.³³ That is to say, remission of the *culpa* of sin could only be given in fact to those who had already demonstrated true contrition by undergoing the *poena*, or at least showing their willingness to do so. That is why a true plenary indulgence could (“*potest*”) actually be granted only to the perfect,³⁴ in which case one might wonder what remains to be remitted. The real task of priests, and Luther is thinking especially of those hearing confession, is to foster rather than to avoid the real work of penance, which is a life-long process. The crushed and contrite Christian has remission of both guilt and penalty.³⁵ Those who rule and lead the church (by virtue

³¹Thesis 25. The term “*potestas*” need not have the connotation of coercive or controlling power, of course. Below we shall see how Luther continued to use the term (and the German “*Gewalt*”) in the sense of “authority” or ἐξουσία.

³²Theses 10 & 11.

³³Thesis 12.

³⁴Thesis 23.

³⁵Thesis 36. “*Quilibet christianus vere compunctus habet remissionem plenariam a pena et culpa etiam sine literis veniarum sibi debitam.*”

of their special *potestas*) should in fact exhort Christians “to be diligent in following Christ, their head, through penalties, death, and hell.”³⁶

By the time Luther came to write his Explanations of the theses on indulgences, new insights began breaking through. In general, the old theology of *humilitas* and gradual purification still predominated, as when Luther elaborates on Thesis 4:

This thesis is evident from reason. The cross of repentance must continue until, according to the Apostle, the body of sin is destroyed [Rom. 6:6] and the inveterate first Adam, along with its image, perishes, and the new Adam is perfected in the image of God. But sin remains until death, although it diminishes daily through the renewing of the mind.³⁷

But in Thesis 7 Luther came to grips with the real, pastoral situation of a Christian going to confession, and there he came to put a new emphasis on the absolution spoken by the priest as the central and crucial event in the sacrament of penance. God begins by humbling and crushing a person, which is his *opus alienum*, but only in order that he might justify him. The penitent, somewhat paradoxically, cannot be sure that his contrition is leading to the desired end; all he feels and experiences is God’s wrath and condemnation. Luther had encountered this spiritual *Sackgasse* already in the *Dictata*, without finding an exit. “Actually man knows so little about his justification that he believes he is very near condemnation.”³⁸ Such a person Luther directs, not to further inner struggle, but to the external power of the priest, to whom God subjects him. In spite

³⁶Thesis 94.

³⁷*LW* 31:89. For more about Luther’s “perfection” language, cf. Lennart Pinomaa, “Die profectio bei Luther” in *Gedenkschrift für D. Werner Elert*. Friedrich Hübner, ed. (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1955). Pp. 119-127.

³⁸*LW* 31:100.

of the vocabulary, Luther does not see this simply as the same *potestas* to rule and judge, but the source of peace and comfort. The penitent, necessarily uncertain about his own contrition, "is constrained to abide by the judgment of another," simply because of the infallible promise of Christ (Mt. 16:19) attached to the priest's absolution. Peace for the troubled conscience is to be found only by "faith of the word," so that faith is the *opus* of the word of Christ applied by the priest. In the sacrament of penance, and especially at the point when the priest pronounces absolution, the penitent is confronted with Christ as the one who is doing the promising (*promentis*, in the present³⁹). We are bidden to believe his word, and are never sure of the remission of guilt except through the external verdict of another applied to us, that is the judgment spoken by the priest. What is especially significant for the understanding of the office of the priest is that this new focus does not introduce a new anthropocentric uncertainty. In the original phrasing of Thesis 7, the emphasis was on *humilitas*, which was the correlative of *potestas*. That was the way of the sacrament of penance when it consists primarily of contrition, confession, and satisfaction. But in the Explanations the external *iudicium* of the priest simply gives voice to the sure promise of Christ, and the correlative of promise is faith. Thus the absolution is to be trusted even if the priest who speaks it is corrupt or insincere.

Therefore it is neither the sacrament nor the priest, but faith in the word of Christ spoken through the priest and his office which justifies you. What difference does it make to you, if the Lord should speak through an ass, either male or female, as long as you hear that word by which you may hope and believe?⁴⁰

³⁹LW 31:100, 105.

⁴⁰LW 31:194.

Since everything depends on faith receiving the promise of Christ spoken through the priest in the absolution, the uncertainty of the merely human reference is removed from both sides of the confessional, both penitent and priest. “It is not as necessary to ask when a person is absolved, ‘Are you sorry?’ as it is to ask, ‘Do you believe that you can be absolved by me?’”⁴¹

The controversy concerning indulgences forced Luther to reexamine the sacrament of penance in great detail. He came to understand the sacrament, not in terms of the three steps emphasized in medieval theology: contrition of the heart, confession with the lips, and satisfaction through works of love.⁴² Rather, Luther began to place more and more emphasis on the absolution spoken by the priest. Absolution is the sure and infallible part of the sacrament, and gives the conscience peace and comfort, because it is guaranteed by the promise of Christ. The office of the priest is to pronounce and proclaim this judgment of another, not merely to exercise spiritual power in his own right. This view would come to transform Luther’s understanding of the ministry and its power.

“Pro veritate inquirenda et timoratis conscientiiis consolandis” (1518)⁴³

The emphasis on remission of guilt as the main part of the sacrament of penance,

⁴¹LW 31:195. Cf. The Small Catechism: “*Gläubst Du auch, daß meine Vergebung Gottes Vergebung sei?*” BKS p. 519, ll. 16-17.

⁴²That these still are the focus of today’s Roman Catholic theology of penance can be seen in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 404-408, §§ 1450-1460,

⁴³WA 1:630-633.

which began in the Explanations of the 95 Theses, came to clearer expression in another set of theses dating from the summer of 1518. Not selected for inclusion in English editions of Luther's works, the *Pro veritate inquirenda* . . . is a pivotal work which is not sufficiently known among Lutheran scholars.⁴⁴ The starting point of the disputation is the primacy of remission of guilt over remission of punishments. The reason is that remission of guilt calms the conscience and reconciles man to God, whereas remission of punishments reconciles man to man, that is, to the church.⁴⁵ When he describes the basis of that remission and that reconciliation, Luther makes explicit again the focus on absolution that began to surface in the Explanations: forgiveness depends neither on the sinner's contrition nor on the priest's office or power, but on faith in Christ's word.⁴⁶ That word of Christ is precisely identified as Matthew 16:19, which figured so prominently in the indulgence controversy.⁴⁷ The forgiveness of sins is certain because the promise of Christ the Savior is certain.⁴⁸ Through the priest's pronouncement, the power of the keys carries out a sure and infallible work by the word and mandate of

⁴⁴I am indebted for my acquaintance with this work to the work of a Jesuit scholar, Jared Wicks, S.J., "*Fides sacramenti - fides specialis: Luther's Development in 1518*". *Gregorianum* 65 (1984), 53-87.

⁴⁵Thesis 4: "*Remissio culpe reconciliat hominem deo, remissio pene reconciliat hominem homini, id est ecclesie.*"

⁴⁶Theses 8-9, "*Remissio culpe non innititur contritioni peccatoris, nec officio aut potestati sacerdotis, innititur potius fidei, que est in verbum Christi . . .*"

⁴⁷It is worth noting that Luther here refers only to the "loosing" bit of the verse, which has become the main point for him: ". . . *verbum Christi dicentis: Quodcunque solveris &c.*"

⁴⁸Thesis 15: "*Certum est ergo, remissa esse peccata [not simply culpe!] si credis remissa, quia certa est Christi salvatoris promissio.*"

God,⁴⁹ even though the priest is not the one actually doing the *remissio*, but only a servant of the word.⁵⁰ Faith may still be referred to as *fides Christi*,⁵¹ but it is more precisely called *fidei, que est in verbum Christi*,⁵² since it is anchored to the promise by which Christ forgives sins mediately, through the ministry of the priest in sacramental penance. That faith which attaches itself where Christ has put his promise is what justifies, and faith needs the word which gets delivered through the priest.

All this implies much for Luther's way of speaking of the ministry,⁵³ and yet Luther himself did not carry things to their conclusion in 1518. What he began to do is to reject much of the traditional vocabulary concerning the priesthood in an effort to find a new way to express what is really central, namely the word of Christ in the sacrament. Thus neither *officium* nor *potestas* sufficiently expressed the new understanding: the forgiveness of guilt, now clearly at center stage in penance, happens *nec officio aut potestati sacerdotis*.⁵⁴ Thus the old categories are no longer completely *sachgemäß*: they no longer measure up to the real matter at stake, which Luther identifies as forgiveness.

⁴⁹Thesis 24: "*Potestas Clavium operatur verbo et mandato dei firmum et infallibile opus . . .*"

⁵⁰Thesis 23: "*Sacerdotes non sunt authores remissionis, sed ministratores verbi in fidem remissionis.*"

⁵¹Thesis 33.

⁵²Thesis 9.

⁵³Indeed, one can probably date Luther's emphasis on the "office" as "ministry" or service from this document.

⁵⁴Nevertheless, the terms could still be used when wedded to the centrality of the gospel, cf. The Smalcald Articles III:7 & 8 (*BKS* pp. 452-453.).

And “vicar” (which seemed to work well enough for Luther in the 95 Theses) will not fill the bill, either. As Luther would say later at Augsburg, what is needed is not a substitute or stand-in for Christ, not even if it were St. Peter himself, but rather someone who will deliver what Christ himself, the real Priest, gives.⁵⁵ But in the *Pro veritate* none of these terms fully delivers the promise for Luther, and the promise has become precisely the indispensable thing to keep in view. Luther is therefore at pains to avoid language which could imply that the priests are somehow the source of the forgiveness that their absolution delivers: *sacerdotes non sunt authores remissionis*.⁵⁶

What the *Pro veritate* shows us is that the gospel has changed Luther’s doctrine of the sacrament of penance, focusing his attention on what Christ promises there. It is beginning to change his language, as well. The new wine of the gospel is beginning to burst the wineskins of late medieval theological discourse. New terms are called for to describe what Christ is doing there in the confessional through the priest, the gospel-at-the-absolution-point. And in the *Pro veritate* the gospel-at-the-absolution-point has pushed Luther furthest along when he describes the priests who deliver absolution as “servants of the word for the faith of forgiveness” (*ministratores verbi in fidem remissionis*⁵⁷). What counts about the priest who pronounces absolution is not who he is

⁵⁵LW 31:279-280.

⁵⁶This is quite a different problem than what Luther had to confront later in his responses to the *Schwärmer*, when the issue was not whether the priests were the source or “authors” of forgiveness, but rather whether their spoken word of forgiveness was actually Christ’s own way of delivering his promise to his people with authority and certainty.

⁵⁷It would be enlightening to trace the various nouns that are placed in the genitive following *fides* in Luther’s writings. The construction seems to pose special problems for translators, some linguistic and some theological. For instance, his early use of *fides Christi*

or what he is able to do, but the word he delivers, which is not his but Christ's. Thus the word of Christ — which comes to us through the priest and is attached to what the priest does there in speaking the absolution — and justifying faith belong together.⁵⁸ Faith (*fides sacramenti, fides Christi*) is what justifies, and the word is necessary for there to be such faith. Indeed, not just any “word” or some abstract principle of the word does the job, but specifically this word that gets “ministered” to the Christian by the priest at the point of absolution.⁵⁹ As Jared Wicks sums up so clearly:

Consequently, when the minister forgives sins by absolution, precisely then and there the Spirit of God elicits justifying faith in Christ and his word. Thus, Luther has come to set justification firmly in the context of an ecclesial sacrament and has systematically defined justifying faith as *fides sacramenti*.⁶⁰

This is a very far cry indeed from the supposed anti-clerical, anti-sacramental theme of the early Luther as characterized by some (cf. above, notes 4 & 5.). This is no “Protestant Luther” in the popular mold. In the wake of his discussions with Cajetan at Augsburg in the Fall of 1518, Luther did reject the papal teaching of the *translatio sacerdotio*, that is, that Christ's priesthood had been transferred to Peter and his

should probably be understood as involving the believer in the sufferings of Christ: faith as identification with Christ and conformity to his paradigm. But what are the implications if one substitutes *remissionis* (as in the *Pro veritate*) or *verbi* (as in the *Acta Augustana, LW 31:271*) between *fides* and *Christi*?

⁵⁸Thesis 32: “*In iis omnibus, dum ministrat verbum Christi, simul fidem exercet, qua intus iustificatur peccator.*”

⁵⁹Thesis 33: “*Nihil enim iustificat, nisi sola fides Christi, ad quam necessaria est verbi per sacerdotem ministratio.*”

⁶⁰Wicks, p. 65. However, the decisive point for Luther is not so much that penance is an *ecclesial* sacrament (which, of course, he does not dispute), but rather that it is Christ's. The appeal is not to the authority of the church, but to the certainty of Christ's promise: “*certa est Christi salvatoris promissio.*”

successors, because such a teaching vested the *potestas* of the priesthood in the human minister. By so doing the priest and his sacerdotal office are made to be the things that finally count in the sacrament, the things upon which forgiveness depends. To this Luther replied, "I do not want Peter or Paul to be the priest, since each one is a sinner who has no sacrifice to offer for me or even for himself. . . . The priesthood of Christ was conferred neither upon Peter nor the pope."⁶¹ But faith can be certain only when it is no longer contingent on merely human reference points, whether in the contrition of the penitent or the sacerdotal *potestas* of the priest. Faith springs from and clings to God's word and promise. "Faith, however, is nothing else than believing what God promises and reveals. . . . Therefore the Word and faith are both necessary, and without the Word there can be no faith."⁶² Faith justifies, makes alive, and so forth, and precisely that faith which receives what Christ gives mediately, through the word. Thus the crucial phrase is no longer *fides Christi* — now the word has inserted itself between Christ and the Christian: *quia sola fides verbi Christi iustificat*. Luther at Augsburg rejoiced in the certainty of faith, a certainty which scandalized Cajetan,⁶³ and faith is only certain when it apprehends Christ neither in heaven nor in the believer's heart, but in that word spoken to us from outside. In his list of proofs Luther emphasizes the specific and located

⁶¹LW 31:279-280.

⁶²LW 31:270-271.; WA 2:13: "*Fides autem est nihil aliud quam illud, quod deus promittit aut dicit, credere. . . . Ideo verbum et fides necessario simul sunt et sine verbo impossibile est esse fidem.*"

⁶³Cf. Barbara Hallensleben, "»Das Heisst eine Neue Kirche Bauen«: Kardinal Cajetans Antwort auf die Reformatorische Lehre von der Rechtfertigungsgewissheit," *Catholica* 39, 1985: 217-39.

character of the promising words of Christ. “Not faith in general is meant here,” he says, commenting on the passage about the Canaanite woman, “but the special faith which was concerned with the daughter who was to be helped . . .”⁶⁴ The *fides sacramenti* which is at the heart of the sacrament of penance is precisely such a *fides specialis*, since it lives only from the specific promise of Christ, “Whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” Such a faith has no interest at all in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, or the personal character or piety of the priest, but neither is it “spiritualized” or subjectively individualized. Rather, as *fides verbi Christi*, it is radically attached to the earthly place where Christ’s promise is delivered: the absolution spoken by the priest. The priest, for his part, is not exercising authority, but is simply doing as he is told like a good servant: he dare not do otherwise than to absolve one who comes to confession!⁶⁵

Saying It in German: *Sermon on Penance* (1519)⁶⁶

It seems characteristic of Luther that his German writings give voice to new insights more slowly than his Latin works. This may indicate a sense of pastoral care and restraint operating in works intended for wider public consideration, while a bolder experimentation with new terms and ideas was appropriate in the context of “professional” theological circles. Whatever the reasons, it took some time for the perspective developed in the *Pro veritate* and echoed at Augsburg to work itself out in

⁶⁴*LW* 31:272.

⁶⁵Cf. the Leipzig Debate: “Every priest must absolve the penitent of punishment and guilt [note the two here conjoined!]. If he does not, he sins.” *LW* 31:317.

⁶⁶*LW* 35:9-22; *WA* 2:714-723.

German, and it was October 1519 before the Sermon on Penance appeared.

In the Sermon on Penance Luther repeats many of the points he first made in the *Pro veritate*. He begins again with the distinction between forgiveness of penalty and guilt (*vorgebung der pein* and *vorgebung der schuld*). By far the greater of these, which can be granted only by God himself from heaven, is the forgiveness of guilt. It is with this that Luther primarily concerns himself in this document. When he identifies “three things” in the sacrament, he ignores completely the sequence of contrition, confession, and satisfaction,⁶⁷ and focuses immediately on absolution spoken by the priest. The external, “*eußerlich*” word of the priest shows, tells, and proclaims the forgiveness of sins to the individual. That forgiveness is announced and spoken by the priest, and it is worked “by God according to and by virtue of the above-quoted words of Christ to St. Peter [Matthew 16:19].”⁶⁸ The second thing in the sacrament is grace, forgiveness, the invisible benefits and blessings spelled out in the words. Thus forgiveness really happens in the sacrament of penance, but it cannot be seen directly, but only believed when it is attached to the external word of the priest.⁶⁹ So the third thing in the sacrament is faith (*fides sacramenti* = *glauben des sacraments*), which is not general or abstract, but

⁶⁷Luther returns to these toward the end of the sermon, mainly to point out how little they matter, provided one understands faith correctly: “*Wo aber das sacrament recht geht ym glauben, da ist die puß, rew, beicht und gnugthuung gar leicht und an alle ferlickeit . . . und mag niemant yrren, widder yn rew, beicht, noch gnugthuung, wer den glauben des sacraments [the literal German for *fides sacramenti* — rendered in English as “sacramental faith”] hatt, und ob er schon yrret, ßo schadet es yhm gar nichts.*” *WA* 2:721; *LW* 35:20.

⁶⁸*LW* 35:11, cf. *Pro veritate*, theses 8-9: “*remissio culpe . . . innititur potius fidei, que est in verbum Christi dicentis: Quodcunque solveris &c.*”

⁶⁹This is *signum-res* language, but it sounds less Augustinian in German!

definite and bound to Christ's promise delivered by the priest.⁷⁰ Luther has often before quoted the saying "*non sacramentum fidei, sed fides sacramenti iustificat,*"⁷¹ and this old dictum now comes out in German as: "*Nit das sacrament, sonder der glaub, der das sacrament glaubt, ablegt die sund.*" Justification is now translated as forgiveness, "*die sund ablegen.*"

If the focus is on forgiveness, which Luther has said only God himself can give, where does this leave the human agents through whom the word is spoken? As he did in the *Pro veritate*, Luther emphasizes that they are servants of the words of Christ.

It follows that the forgiveness of guilt is not within the province of any human office or authority [*yrgend eyns menschen ampt adder gewalt, cf. nec officio aut potestati sacerdotis* in the *Pro veritate*], be it pope, bishop, priest, or any other. Rather it depends exclusively upon the word of Christ and your own faith. . . . Priests, bishops, and popes are only servants who hold before you the word of Christ, upon which you should depend and rely with a firm faith as upon solid rock.⁷²

The true honor and dignity of the clergy derive from this word of forgiveness which they are appointed to speak according to Christ's promise. "The word is not to be honored for the sake of the priests, bishops, or pope; but priests, bishops, and pope are to be honored for the sake of the word, as those who bring you the word and message of your God that you are loosed from sins." When no priest is available, a layman — "even a woman or a child" — can speak absolution, and indeed they must, since faith is

⁷⁰" . . . *der glaube, der do festiglich darfur helt, das die Absolutio und wort des priesters seyn war, yn der krafft der wort Christi 'was du lösest, soll loß seyn &c.'*"

⁷¹E.g. in the *Acta Augustana*, WA 2:15.

⁷²LW 35:12.

impossible where such a word is not spoken: “*βο gantz und gar ligt alle dingk ym glauben auff gottis wort,*” so utterly does everything depend on faith, which in turn lives only from God’s word.

One effect of this insight into the centrality and necessity of Christ’s word of promise for faith is a leveling of the various ranks in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The “*ordenung*” is to be respected, even though it makes no difference to the effect of the absolution, “as if it counted for more when given by a bishop or a pope than when given by a priest or a layman.”⁷³ When God’s word is upheld as the active and effective thing in penance, then even the distinction between priest and layman becomes, by comparison, of minor importance. What matters above all is that God has not only shown himself to be a gracious and merciful God for us in Christ, but that he also “gives you a sign of it through another person!”⁷⁴ One has Christ’s forgiveness most surely and certainly when Christ is one step removed, that is, when forgiveness is mediated through his word. And one has that word most surely and comfortingly when it comes from outside oneself, spoken through another person. That is the glory of the priest as he speaks absolution: he is the ordained and divinely appointed *Gegenüber* through whom Christ’s forgiveness always comes to us as the *externum verbum*. From one point of view, then, the priest’s voice should be heard as that of Christ himself when he speaks absolution. But at the same time this gives the priest no ground for boasting about his special status or divine authority: he is simply an instrument, a servant of the words he speaks. His is not to judge

⁷³LW 35:13.

⁷⁴LW 35:14.

the genuineness of people's contrition: there will always be doubt about that. The priest's job is to deliver what he has been told to give: "To him it is enough that you make confession and seek an absolution. He is supposed to give it to you and is obligated to do so."⁷⁵ Nor should it matter to one's faith if the priest should make a mistake, or speak the absolution insincerely. Everything depends on faith that receives what God himself dispenses in his word, namely forgiveness.

From this Luther draws an important implication about the keys. In the *Pro veritate* the keys were still called a *potestas*, which carried out a certain and infallible work by the word and mandate of God.⁷⁶ In the Sermon on Penance Luther is pushed still further, and the *potestas* vocabulary (or its German equivalent, "gewaltt") is no longer seen to be fully adequate to carry the full weight of the gospel promise which comes in absolution.

It follows that the keys or the authority of St. Peter is not an authority at all but a service; and the keys have not been given to St. Peter but to you and me. The keys are yours and mine. . . . Their entire virtue lies rather in this, that they help sinners by comforting and strengthening their conscience. Thus Christ ordered that [the exercise of] authority in the church should be a rendering of service [*Also hatt Christus geordenet, das der kirchen gewalt soll seyn eyn dinstparkeit*"].⁷⁷

The vocabulary of *potestas* / *Gewalt* may still be used, but the gospel is filling the words with new meaning. Thus it comes out in German what Luther had said of the priests in the *Pro veritate*, that they were *ministratores verbi in fidem remissionis*. Their

⁷⁵LW 35:15, "die [Absolution] soll er dir geben und ist dir sie schuldig."

⁷⁶Thesis 24: "*Potestas Clavium operatur verbo et mandato dei firmum et infallibile opus.*"

⁷⁷LW 35:16f.; WA 2:719.

service is now above all to proclaim the gospel, and it gives the wrong picture altogether if their office is described merely in terms of power and authority. And when Luther says here that the keys, as service, are given not to St. Peter (that is, the clergy) but to all Christians, his point is not that there is no need for priests, or (still less) that everyone can be his own priest. Rather, the forgiveness which the words deliver is for everyone, and the *ministratores*, the servants of the word, are not at liberty to wield this “authority” as if it were theirs to do with what they like. The context makes it clear that Luther is promoting a ministry of the gospel aimed at instilling faith and comforting consciences, in opposition to a hierarchy of ecclesial rulers and judges. The ministry of the word is not for the ministers themselves, but for the Christians, whose faith happens where the word is proclaimed. From here it is a straight line to Article V of the Augsburg Confession, where the saving faith is the great thing, toward which goal God sets up the ministry of proclaiming the gospel and serving up the sacraments. These tasks involve ministers, human instruments, of course, but the spotlight is never on them. What is offered *through* them does not depend *on* them, rather their office is to give Christ’s forgiveness through the *externum verbum*.

One misunderstands Luther in 1519 if one fails to notice that this emphasis on forgiveness through the external word is conspicuously absent in *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*,⁷⁸ written about the same time as the sermon on penance. In this work Luther returns to the theme of inner struggle against sin, his earlier *theologia crucis*. In baptism God makes promises, indeed, but these are related to the life-long

⁷⁸LW 35:29-43; WA 2:727-737.

process of driving out sin. God pledges that he will finish this work which in this life only makes a beginning, so that the believer can say, "But I am baptized, and through my baptism God, who cannot lie, has bound himself in a covenant with me. He will not count my sin against me, but will slay it and blot it out."⁷⁹ Baptism thus involves every Christian, clergy and lay alike, in this continuing process of mortifying the flesh and purifying the soul. The focus has shifted from God's word of forgiveness to baptism as a vow we make "to slay sin and to become holy through the work and grace of God, to whom we yield and offer ourselves," And from there it is but a short step to regarding the priesthood, not as service or ministry, but as a higher spiritual estate, through which a person may chose to perfect his baptismal vows more quickly through greater suffering. Above this *geistlichen orden* or special estate of the priesthood is yet another, of still greater personal sanctity, of which the function is described as "*regiren*," ruling.⁸⁰ The promise of forgiveness which had come to dominate the function of the ministry in regard to sacramental penance was still far from clear when it came to the sacrament of baptism.

⁷⁹LW 35:36.

⁸⁰LW 31:41; WA 2:736. Note the similarities of this concept of the office with that of the Hebrews lectures described above, and the contrast with the sermon on penance, where the *gewalt* of the priest was interpreted as *dinstparkeit*, service. "*Regieren*" and "*Regiment*" continued to be used, of course (cf. AC 14 & 28), but the terms became freighted with connotations of serving the faith of Christians ("*in fidem*").

CHRISTIAN PRIESTHOOD IN THE 1520 WRITINGS

*The Freedom of a Christian*⁸¹

In Luther's three great writings of 1520, a new theme emerges strongly in his understanding of priests and their ministry, namely the doctrine that all believers are priests. This idea is closely related to baptism, and reflects Luther's rethinking of baptism under the influence of the gospel. The result differed profoundly from the view of baptism expounded in the 1519 Sermon on Baptism, but it also differed in important ways from the evangelical understanding of penance that emerged from the indulgence controversy. As we have seen, in the *Pro veritate* and the Sermon on Penance, Luther came to treasure the words of Christ which the priest serves up by pronouncing absolution for the strengthening of faith in forgiveness, which is promised in that word of Christ. The emphasis was on the external word, spoken by another, and that word defined and shaped the ministry of the *ministratores verbi*.

In *The Freedom of a Christian* Luther connects Christian priesthood with faith, which connects and unites the believer with Christ. The emphasis is not on the human priest through whom Christ serves the faith of Christians, but on the effects and functions of such faith for believers. The only true priest for Christians is Christ himself. Those we

⁸¹LW 31:333-377; WA 7:1-73.

call priests on earth merely mirror the work of Christ the priest. The priesthood of Christ is said to consist primarily in two main activities: prayer and teaching, “of which the prayers and the preaching of human priests are visible types.”⁸² Thus human priests reflect Christ not because of their personal sanctity or moral likeness to him, but through the functions of their office (*officia*).

All believers are connected to Christ by their faith as a bride is joined to her husband, and Christ gives and shares his own kingship and priesthood with all who believe. Luther’s ideas here are being shaped by the exegesis of 1 Peter 2:9, and there is a marked return to the language of the earlier *Brautmystik*. To be a priest is to have the privilege of doing the same priestly functions that Christ carries out, namely prayer and teaching, although Luther distinguishes between what happens “outwardly/visibly” and what the reality is “inwardly/invisibly.”

As priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things. These are the functions of priests, and they cannot be granted to any unbeliever. Thus Christ has made it possible for us, provided we believe in him, to be not only his brethren, co-heirs, and fellow-kings, but also his fellow-priests. Therefore we may boldly come into the presence of God in the spirit of faith and cry “Abba, Father!” pray for one another, and do all things which we see done and foreshadowed in the outer and visible works of priests.⁸³

There is thus no qualitative difference between Christians. “The outer and visible works of priests” illustrate what every believer does (inwardly) based on his faith. Luther’s statements seem radical enough in the context of his dispute with Rome, but in fact he is finding his way back to the vocabulary of the New Testament. In just this way

⁸²LW 31:354.

⁸³LW 31:355.

the Biblical language of priesthood describes Christ as **the** Priest, and those who are connected with Christ through faith as priests with him.⁸⁴

Where does this new vocabulary of the Christians priesthood lead Luther when it comes to those who hold the public (“visible”) office in the church? It would be a mistake to assume that Christians no longer need bother with such external offices once the real (“internal”) priesthood of faith has been recovered. Luther anticipates such a question.

You will ask, “If all who are in the church are priests, how do these whom we now call priests differ from laymen?” I answer: Injustice is done those words “priest,” “cleric,” “spiritual,” “ecclesiastic,” when they are transferred from all Christians to those few who are now by a mischievous usage called “ecclesiastics.” Holy Scripture makes no distinction between them, although it gives the name “ministers,” “servants,” “stewards” to those who are now proudly called popes, bishops, and lords.⁸⁵

At various times, Luther gave more than one answer to the question of differences among Christians, between clergy and laity.⁸⁶ The gospel has begun to make itself heard in his answer when he no longer tries to weigh or measure the sins and righteousness of one against the other, or to decide whose character is more conformed to Christ. In 1518 he began to speak of the “ministry” of priests and to emphasize the idea of service. By 1520 the gospel has rendered the old vocabulary of priesthood

⁸⁴Cf. Hebrews 4:14; 1 Peter 2:5; Revelation 5:10. The Biblical language, of course, involves kingship as well as priesthood. But Luther’s central concern at this point is to refute the clergy’s exclusive claim on “priesthood,” which distorted the ministry of the words of Christ.

⁸⁵*LW* 31:356.

⁸⁶Cf. above, in the Hebrews lectures (p. 6), the Sermon on Penance (p. 20), and the Sermon on Baptism (p. 22).

unusable, or rather, it has redefined the terms. This was an amazingly bold step for Luther to take. In a stroke he changed the way the church spoke about those who preached the word and administered the sacraments, a habit of ecclesiastical usage that dated back to Clement of Rome⁸⁷ in the late first century. What Luther realized was the power of our theological language not only to express, but also to shape and direct our thought. Once the “ministers, servants, and stewards” of the New Testament had been identified as “priests,” new things could be predicated about them based on their priesthood. The title acted as a kind of color filter through which the office was seen, and over the centuries a vast edifice of theological reasoning and conclusions had been constructed based on that choice of vocabulary.

Luther demolished the whole edifice, rejected the application of the term “priest” in any exclusive sense to the clergy as a special class or estate within the church, and returned to the New Testament language of “servants” and “ministers.”⁸⁸ Instead of arguing about what they should be called, Luther insists on what they should do: “. . . those who are now proudly called popes, bishops, and lords . . . should according to the ministry of the Word [*ministerio verbi*] serve others and teach them the faith of Christ and the freedom of believers.”⁸⁹ The difference is not that some Christians are priests

⁸⁷Cf. 1 Clement 40:5, “For to the High Priest his proper ministrations are allotted, and to the priests the proper place has been appointed, . . . The layman is bound by the ordinances for the laity.”

⁸⁸As will be seen, however, he continued to use the term in its conventional sense, but the context should always load the language with new meaning.

⁸⁹*LW* 31:356.

while others are not, but rather consists in what various Christians are called upon to carry out publicly. “Although we are all equally priests, we cannot all publicly minister and teach. We ought not to do so even if we could.”⁹⁰

To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation⁹¹

The address *To the Christian Nobility* had sought a clear political agenda, namely to enlist the support of the civil authorities for the defense of reform. He based this appeal on the spiritual equality of all Christians, based on their common baptism. Thus the whole concept of a separate “spiritual estate” is a complete fabrication without basis in scripture.⁹² The only distinctions among Christians have nothing to do with personal sanctity or gradations of holiness, but merely reflect different callings and works (“office”). Those who administer God’s word and sacraments do so in order to serve and benefit others, just as other Christians (including civil rulers) carry out their callings to benefit others. Significantly, the true Christian priesthood is now connected explicitly to baptism rather than correlated simply with faith. Baptism gives the priesthood of all Christians a common external source and point of reference. “All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. . . . This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are

⁹⁰This distinction between what is given to all Christians, but rightly exercised publicly by only a few, would be further elaborated in Luther’s writings *Concerning the Ministry* and *That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge . . .*, both from 1523.

⁹¹*LW* 44:123-217; *WA* 6:404-469.

⁹²*LW* 44:127. Note the sharp contrast to the Sermon on Baptism, just a year earlier, in which the “spiritual estate” had been praised as a higher, faster way to perfect one’s baptism.

all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people.” There can be no higher or lower classes of Christians, but there are differences in the work and function that has been appointed to each. “Priests, bishops, or popes, are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the word of God and the sacraments, which is their work and office.”⁹³ The power of the keys, given by Christ not to Peter alone but to the whole Christian community, are not given for establishing new doctrines or worldly government, but for the proclamation of the gospel, the binding or loosing of sins.⁹⁴ The princes, then, have both the authority and the duty to involve themselves in the reform of the church, not because they are princes but because they are baptized Christians.

It becomes very clear that the gospel has changed the way Luther speaks of the ministry when he discusses several abuses related to it. The divisions of rank within the hierarchy are alien to scripture, being instituted by the church. Likewise the requirement of celibacy has been imposed by human regulations. But the gospel is proclaimed through the preached word and the sacraments, and Luther now sees these as the main thing in the ministry, in contrast to merely human arrangements or the complexities of the papal hierarchy:

I am not referring here to popes, bishops, canons, and monks. God has not instituted these offices. They have taken these burdens upon themselves, so they will have to bear them themselves. I want to speak only of the ministry which God has instituted, the responsibility of which is to minister word and sacrament to a

⁹³*LW* 44:130.

⁹⁴*LW* 44:134.

congregation, among whom they reside.⁹⁵

It is worth noting that this ministry of the word that is to be carried out among God's people — all of whom are priests by virtue of their baptism — is clearly instituted by God himself, and is certainly not set up by the “royal priesthood” as a mere practical convenience. Luther's teaching about the priesthood of all the baptized developed only after his concept of the ministry had undergone a profound transformation. That transformation resulted from the influence of the gospel at a very specific point: the point of confession and absolution.

*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*⁹⁶

We close our tracking of the ministry in Luther's earliest writings with what amounts to his frontal assault on the sacramental system of the Roman church. Luther's constant refrain is the necessity of scripture for correcting abuses and defining the genuine doctrine and practice of the sacraments. Thus the scriptural teaching of the ministry as service and gospel proclamation for the faith of others (“*in fidei remissionis*”) takes on a central importance. What Luther had come to grasp in relation to penance as early as 1518 he now applies to the Lord's Supper, and he specifically challenges the practice of communing of the laity in only one kind. Such a practice, Luther says, puts the priests in charge of the sacrament, when in fact they are supposed to

⁹⁵LW 44:176. Note that the minister and his service are rooted and located at a specific place, namely the congregation among whom they reside, in order to serve them with the word and sacraments.

⁹⁶LW 36:11-126; WA 497-573.

be servants, a fact which applies to the other sacraments as well. "The priests are not lords, but servants in duty bound to administer both kinds to those who desire them. . . . These same servants are likewise bound to administer baptism and absolution to everyone who seeks them, because he has a right to them."⁹⁷ So likewise when referring to the institution of baptism (Mark 16:16) Luther says, "Christ has not ordained authorities or powers or lordships in his church, but ministries the doctrine that There was no conferring of any power there [Mark 16:16], but only the instituting of the ministry of those who baptize."⁹⁸ Of the eucharist, baptism, and penance, therefore, the same holds true: "nothing is said of power, but only of ministry."

It is from this perspective that Luther criticizes the understanding of ordination as a sacrament which confers a special character on the priest. When the clergy are said to receive a special grace that sets them apart from and over the ordinary Christian, the result is not authority for service or ministry, but a tyrannical abuse of power. In opposition to this, the true ministry of the church is focused on serving, and therefore concentrates especially on preaching the word of God. "The duty of a priest is to preach, and if he does not preach he is as much a priest as a picture of a man is a man. . . . The ministry of the Word that makes the priest and the bishop."⁹⁹ Of course, no individual may arrogate to himself the right things which are given to all Christians. It is necessary

⁹⁷*LW* 36:27. Cf. two points above, both related to absolution: n. 65 (from the Leipzig Debate), and n. 75 (from the Sermon on Penance).

⁹⁸*LW* 36:82.

⁹⁹*LW* 36:115.

that a person be called and appointed by the church to preach and administer the sacraments publicly. “Therefore this ‘sacrament’ of ordination, if it is anything at all, is nothing else than a certain rite whereby one is called to the ministry of the church.” Note that Luther is not rejecting ordination. He is rejecting any understanding of the ministry of the church that loses the focus on service and the word of Christ, preached for the sake of justifying faith. He refuses to acknowledge an ordination that does not place one among the *ministratores verbi in fidem remissionis*. When attention shifts from the external word and the faith which it kindles and strengthens in God’s people, when attention is directed rather at those who hold the office and seek to wield some kind of *potestas* or “authority” of their own, when the ministers try to define themselves as a special spiritual class distinct from other Christians — then the ministry has been turned into a thing of the law rather than an instrument of the gospel. Against such errors, Luther says, “Priesthood is properly nothing but the ministry of the Word — the Word, I say; **not the law, but the gospel.**”¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰LW 36:116.

A CONCLUDING WORD, AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Luther did not “discover” the gospel all at once. It gradually “invaded” and infiltrated his theology, making itself heard especially as he was driven by his engagement with scripture and the errors of his opponents. The first place where the gospel came clear for Luther was not in the context of academic speculation, but in a matter of everyday pastoral care, the sacrament of penance. In the confessional he was confronted by his own sins and the uncertainty of his own inner life, so that confession was, in the beginning, a terrifying experience for Luther. But it was precisely there, as the priest spoke the absolution according to the promise of Christ, that Luther came to hear the very voice of the gospel as an external word of forgiveness for him. And the priest speaking absolution (because he is a servant of the word and is obligated [”*schuldig*”] to do so) became the first and clearest embodiment of the ministry of the gospel. Whenever the pastor did his work — teaching, preaching, baptizing, absolving, communing — he was always, in one way or another, carrying out that same ministry of the word so that people might believe in the forgiveness provided in Christ. That is the glory of all *ministratores verbi in fidem remissionis*.

Luther’s attachment to absolution did not fade as he came to find and confess the gospel clearly in many other ways. Throughout his life he treasured the external word as it is delivered in absolution. Thus the period up to 1520 offers us the beginning, not the

end, of his view of ministry as service of that word. What is striking and perplexing, from our contemporary point of view, is the large-scale abandonment, for all practical purposes, of confession among us who lay claim to Luther's name and doctrine. We who are called to be *ministratores verbi in fidem remissionis* — to wield Christ's words so that his people may believe in his forgiveness — do well to reflect on the neglect, and to foster the renewal, of that means of grace for the life of the church.

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