

THE GRADES AND RANKS OF MINISTERS OF THE CHURCH

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Preface: A very significant part of the debate concerning church and ministry between the faculties of the St. Louis seminary of the Missouri Synod and the Wauwatosa/Thiensville seminary of the Wisconsin Synod was over the question whether God has instituted only one form of called public ministry of the Word, namely, the pastoral office, or whether his institution may include also various other forms of public ministry. This discussion has played a significant role in the history of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, but it is not our intention to review that lengthy and never-fully-resolved discussion in our anniversary volume, except in so far as it appears in other more general articles. But with the appearance of another volume of Concordia Publishing House's publication of John Gerhard's massive dogmatics, English readers now have an opportunity to consider the views on this much debated issue which were held and taught by the teacher who is generally ranked as the leading dogmatician of the Lutheran church. A brief excerpt of Gerhard's discussion of the topic is reproduced below.¹ We leave it to our readers to draw their own conclusions about where Gerhard would have stood in the more recent debate.

Whether there are grades among ministers of the church.

§ 204. Our discussion about the grades and ranks of ministers is summarized in these parts:

- (1) *Whether there are and should be grades among ministers of the church.*
- (2) *Which and how many those grades are.*

Regarding the first part, note that the diversity of *names*, of *functions*, and of *gifts* proves that there are grades among ministers of the church. The diversity of *names* occurs in the Old Testament as well as in the New. In the Old Testament there was a chief priest, there were

¹Excerpt from *Theological Commonplaces*, vol. 26/2, *On the Ministry* (Part 2), pages 18-21. Translated by Richard J. Dinda; edited with annotations by Benjamin T. G. Mayes; assistant editor Heath R. Curtis. Translation © Concordia Publishing House, www.cph.org. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved. Published "as is" except for reformatting to fit our page layout. A review of this volume of Gerhard's dogmatics is included in the book review section of this issue of *WLQ*.

lower priests, and there were Levites appointed to the ministries of the priests (Num. 3:[5]). In the New Testament Paul lists these distinct names for ministers, Eph. 4:11: "Christ gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as shepherds and teachers." 1 Cor. 12:28-30: "And God has placed some in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then powers, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all powers? Do all have the gift of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?" In 1 Tim. 3:2 and 8 and in Titus 1:7 there is distinct mention of "bishops" and "deacons." We shall have to give the diversity of functions later on the basis of the definition of each of those orders. The diversity of *gifts* is proved from the testimony of both Holy Scripture and experience (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:4ff.; 1 Pet. 4:10; etc.).

§ 205. Therefore there can be no doubt that there were grades and orders among ministers of the church both in the Old Testament and in the early apostolic church. *However, the question is whether still today there should be grades among ministers of the church.* Hadrianus Saravia discusses this at great length in his *Tract. de diversis ministrorum gradibus* and in the defense thereof against Beza, published in London in 1611.

** Hugo Grotius, *Pietat. ord. Holland.*, p. 118: "The Puritans think that it is a great weakness that the churches are ruled by bishops. I have not planned to discuss here what many good men find lacking in the governance of our church and by what means they think that the faults which lead to anarchy therein can best be cured. Nevertheless I do not restrain myself from revealing the source and origin of this fault as well as of other faults. We think that we shall be more and more pure the farther we go away from all that the Roman church has established, without distinction. Also, we are unwilling to notice that among the many ailments of that body there have still remained some remnants of a healthier age. "The medicine has exceeded its measure." Page 120: "In the Synod of Emden the ministers decreed many things about ruling the churches. The first point is that one church should not exercise lordship over another; in fact, everyone should be careful of any suspicion or occasion of lordship. Although the episcopal eminence is not a lordship, it is quite clear that with these words it is being indicated." **2

We vehemently disapprove of the anarchy and disturbance of those who remove ranking [*ordo*] from the ecclesiastical ministry, since it is a

²Sections marked with double asterisks are supplemental marginal notes which Gerhard entered into his copy of the *Loci* which were incorporated into subsequent editions of the *Loci*.

source of discord and of every evil. In our churches we retain ranking among ministers and decree that this must be retained, so that some are *bishops*, some are *presbyters*, some are *deacons*, etc.

- (1) With the variety and difference of gifts God Himself makes a ranking among ministers. This diversity of gifts is noticed not only in ministers of the early church but also in ministers of the church today. Therefore there ought to be grades of ministers also in our church.
- (2) The example of the apostolic and early church is worth imitating [αξιολόγητον]. But in that church there were distinct orders of ministers that were indeed divinely established (1 Cor. 12:28; [Eph.] 4:11).
- (3) In the church all things should be done “decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). But that good order requires ranking among ministers of the church, lest confusions arise. In correctly governing every assembly, there is required the ranking of those who are in charge. Therefore the same thing is required in the churchly assembly.
- (4) The establishment of ranking among ministers of the church contributes to harmony and unity, prevents one from fearing the disturbances that arise from the selfishness and ambition of lower ministers, and places a restraint on the rashness of those who try to disturb the peace of the church.
- (5) From the ranking and grades of ministers, this advantage also occurs: that those who are going to be promoted to higher grades can first be tested in the lower ministries. 1 Tim. 3:13: “Those who served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good degree.” Chrysostom (on 1 Timothy 3, homily 11) comments as follows on those words: “Those who have demonstrated their diligence and vigilance in those things that are lower will easily reach those things that are higher and more excellent.” In the early church they carefully observed the custom that one would approach the higher ministries through grades. Gregory Nazianzen (*Vita Basilii*) testifies about this that “first, he was a lector of the sacred volumes in the church; then, an interpreter and expounder. Only then was he admitted into the number of presbyters and, finally, of bishops.” He also says that the “nautical law” must be observed in the selection of ministers. That law “first entrusts the oars to a man, and then he is placed at the bow, if he is going to be the pilot.” So also it happens in the military that from a soldier a man next becomes a captain and only then a general. Cyprian “ordained first as a lector” a young man named Aurelius, of an

illustrious family, an outstanding confessor of Christ's name along with his colleagues. "For though Aurelius was worthy of a higher rank, nevertheless it was pleasing that he begin from the office of lector" (bk. 2, Letter 5).

- (6) Among the angels serving God in the church triumphant there are certain grades and orders (Eph. 1:21; Col. 1:16; 1Pet. 3:22). So also, among the ministers of the Word who are serving God in the church militant, it is fitting that there be grades and orders. [*Ius canonicum*,] c. *Ad hoc*, dist. 89, from Boniface to Eulalius:

Moreover, from a provision of dispensation he has established that there be diverse grades and distinct orders so that when the lesser show reverence to the greater, a true harmony may be made and a joining together out of diversity, and the administration of each office may be done correctly. You see, the whole could not continue to exist in another way unless this sort of great ranking of difference preserved it. But because each creature cannot be governed or live in one and the same quality, the example of the heavenly hosts instructs us that, because there are angels and archangels, it is clear that they are not equals but differ one from the other in power and ranking.

** Basil, on Psalm 33: "Some in the church are like eyes—such as the elders. Some are like the tongue—such as the pastors. Others are like hands—such as the deacons. Others are like feet—such as those who serve the lowlier ministries of the church." **

Things to note about the grades of ministers.

§ 206. Regarding these grades of ministers we should point out:

- (1) The power of ministry and jurisdiction must be distinguished from order or, as some say, from "the power of order." Although there are diverse orders in the ecclesiastical ministry, nevertheless *the power of ministry* in the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments and *the power of jurisdiction*, which consists of the use of the Keys, belong to all ministers equally. Consequently, the Word preached, the Sacraments distributed, and the absolution pronounced by him who has been legitimately called to the ecclesiastical ministry—even if he is in the lowest rank of the ministry—are just as valid and effectual as if they had been preached, distributed, and pronounced by the greatest bishop, prophet, or apostle. Just as the diversity of gifts, so also the diversity of grades does not change the power or efficacy of doctrine and Sacraments. 1 Cor. 3:5: "What is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through

whom you were brought to faith, and to each one just as the Lord gave." Verse 7: "So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gave the growth." 2 Cor. 12:9: "The power of God is made perfect in weakness." Gal. 2:8: "For He who worked through Peter for the apostleship of the circumcised worked through me also among the Gentiles."

- (2) This diversity of grades certainly does depend on divine right: *With regard to its genus*, according as it is necessary for good order and tranquility in the church that there are some distinct grades. *With regard to gifts*, according as by that variety and diversity of gifts God declares that He wants distinct grades to be established among ministers. *With regard to some grades* in particular, according as He distinguished the office of prophets and apostles from the other grades and set those ahead of these. On the other hand, one cannot say *absolutely and generally* about all the grades of the ecclesiastical ministry that their institution and distinction depends on divine institution. In fact, those grades have neither been prescribed by God nor used by the apostles in a certain and necessary number, just as the Sacraments have been restricted to two by divine institution and apostolic practice. Rather, the church has been given freedom according to circumstances—namely, of time and of size—to establish more or fewer grades among ministers in any assembly.
- (3) No one should offer himself to the higher ministries of the church nor thrust himself into them by his own choice. Rather, let him wait until he has been elevated to that summit of honor with the church consenting and especially by the suffrage of the presbyters. "Whoever strives for primacy on earth finds confounding in heaven."
- (4) One must carefully avoid letting the *primacy of rank* degenerate into a *preeminence of power*. This has happened in the Roman church. The primacy of rank was once given to its bishops because of the renown of the city, which was the capital of the empire; because of the constancy in truth and holiness of their predecessors; because of the multitude of martyrs; and because of that common opinion of the ancients that Paul and Peter planted that church. With the passing of time, however, that primacy of rank was changed into a preeminence of power. It finally degenerated completely into a tyranny that decides and does whatever it wishes. [*Ius canonicum*,] c. *Primae sedis*, dist. 99, from the Third Council of Carthage, can. 26: "The bishop of the first see should not be called 'prince of priests' or 'chief priest' or anything of this sort, but only

'bishop of the first see.' Also, the Roman pontiff should not be called 'universal.'"

Gerhard completes his discussion of ranks or grades with a lengthy description and evaluation of the various ranks which existed in the Old and New Testaments and in the church of his day. Important features of this discussion are the question whether the apostolic office was passed on and an evaluation of the Roman Catholic orders and ranks of ministry (*Commonplaces*, XXVI 2, § 207-247, p 21-73).