

# On The Establishment And Preservation Of The Public Ministry

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Karl Georg Stockhardt (1842-1913) was the most highly regarded exegete of the second generation of the Missouri Synod. Educated in the universities of Germany, he came to the Missouri Synod from the emerging Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Germany. On his arrival in America he quickly became a part-time, then a full-time professor at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.

The church is the congregation of believers. The marks of the church are word and sacrament. Wherever God's word is preached and the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution, one is certain to find a greater or a lesser band of believing Christians. For God's word cannot and shall not return empty (Isaiah 55:11). Therefore Luther writes, "God's word cannot be without God's people." And he continues on, "On the other hand God's people cannot be without God's word." Christ says, "My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27). St. Paul exhorts the Christians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16). True Christians come to him. God's people cannot live without God's word. Just as faith is kindled through the word, in the same way it is preserved and strengthened through the word. Therefore wherever a small band of Christians is gathering together, there God's word is working, there the word is preached, heard, learned. There also is the visible word, the sacrament, in custom and practice.

But to whom did the Lord give the command to preach the word and to administer the sacraments? Before Christ ascended to heaven, he spoke to his disciples, "Go and teach all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything, what I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:19-20). And he added, "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the world." He gave this command to these to whom the following promise has been given, "I am with you all always, until the end of the world," that is, with the disciples of all ages until the end of the world. All believing Christians have the command of Christ, to teach and to baptize. The Lord has entrusted to his disciples, to his believers, the power of the keys, which is the right to forgive and to retain sins, and with that all ecclesiastical authority (Mt. 16:16-19; Mt. 18:17-19; John 20:21-23). All believing Christians are priests before God and are called to proclaim the virtues of God (1 Pt. 2:9).

Now to be sure from the beginning of Christendom, there has been the custom and arrangement of appointing for the public service in word and sacrament particular individuals who were especially qualified and adept. In the ancient church those were the bishops, the elders, and the deacons. Now they are the preachers or pastors. But to speak with Luther, when a band of Christians is calling one or more preachers, "in this way some are pulled out from the band so that they instead of the congregation will fulfill the ecclesiastical duty (*Amt*), which is the duty of all believers."

Christians, who are all spiritual priests and who are all called to preach, baptize, absolve, and so forth, transfer their priestly rights to those select men, so that these men, in the name and commission of all, preach the gospel and administer the sacraments for the sake of the community. In this way, the public ministry is established in the local community. Indeed the congregation of every locality has the power and authority to appoint for themselves preachers. In the Smalcald Articles it states, "Therefore it follows, where there is the true church, there is also the power to choose and ordain servants of the church." Christ says, "Truly I say to you, what you will bind on earth shall also be bound in heaven; what you will loosen on earth shall also be loosed in

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heaven. Again I say to you, 'Where two among you on earth agree, whatever it is that they wish to ask, that shall be given to them by my Father in heaven.' For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the middle among them" (Mt 18:18, 20). That means at every locality, where a band of Christians finds itself gathered together, and where only two or three are there, there is Christ with all his grace, gifts and privileges, there are the keys of the kingdom of heaven, there is also the power to choose and to appoint servants of the church.

The church, however, has not only the power and right but also, as our Confessions say, has "God's mandate that they shall appoint preachers and deacons." The matter does not rest solely in believers' free judgment or discretion, whether they want to administer the gifts entrusted to them, that is word and sacrament, in this way or in some other way. For the public ministry of the Word is ordained and established by God himself. The apostle Paul reminds the elders from Ephesus of the fact, and that holds true for all preachers, that they "have been placed as bishops by the Holy Spirit, in order to tend the congregation of God" (Acts 20:28). And in Ephesians 4:11 he testifies about the exalted Christ, "he appointed some to be apostles, but some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be shepherds and teachers." According to the Greek text, it actually declares, "And he has given some to be apostles, some to be shepherds and teachers." Therefore it is clear that the named offices are desired, established, and ordained by Christ. But the words signify still more and they include also this idea, that Christ provides qualified people for these offices in his church. Shepherds and teachers are gifts which the Lord bestows to his congregation. The rule of Christ in his church on earth shows itself in this, that Christ himself at all times awakens among Christians men who are willing to serve in his kingdom, whom he equips with the Holy Spirit and gifts, whose study and whose training he blesses and prospers and makes them capable and suitable to carry on the ministry of the New Testament.

For that reason the congregation should accept these gifts thankfully from the hand of the Lord, and they should employ them for their good and benefit. Christians should, as Luther writes, "recognize this kindness and give thanks for it, that God has directed the church to choose for itself individuals for the ministry of the Word and service of the Sacrament, and that he also will exert his power through the persons chosen by the church; and he will awaken many among the same and enlighten them with special gifts for the betterment of the church" (*Hallische Ausg.* XVII, 1442, 1443).

Yes, Christians exercise a high godly right and fulfill a high godly duty when they establish the public ministry of the Word. All these Christian congregations do well to consider this, in particular, when they are in the position and are at the point of choosing and calling for themselves preachers. When in such cases a congregation realizes that it is doing a noble godly work, it will then undertake this work in the fear of the Lord and with prayer to him, and it will be intent on doing everything honestly and in an orderly way. They will see to it that they will obtain a preacher who is qualified and skilled with the treasures of the kingdom of heaven which are known to the congregation, who correctly administers the divine mysteries, who is apt to teach, and who adorns the wholesome teachings with a pious way of life, so that the bad example of the teacher does not hinder the effect of the teaching (1 Tim. 3:1ff.). A Lutheran congregation, which is in possession of the pure word of God and the unadulterated sacraments, will want to make certain that the man who will become their preacher will believe and teach properly, so that he may preach the gospel in their midst as Christ proclaimed and delivered it to his apostles, as Christ wants it to be preached and taught to his congregation, and that the Sacrament will be administered according to the institution and in accordance with the will of Christ. Christ himself gives to his church shepherds and teachers according to his pleasure.

But even though there is one Spirit, yet there are various gifts, and these different gifts should be employed according to the Lord's will for the general benefit (1 Cor. 12:7). If a congregation recognizes all this correctly, it will want to investigate which shepherd and teacher the Lord has intended and prepared exactly for it, which man corresponds the best with its requirements, and the congregation will accordingly accept worthwhile good counsel, and they will ask advice from such men who possess extensive awareness of people, namely, from the officers of the synod. The congregation puts aside all external, carnal considerations and motives. And when they have to choose between several suitable candidates in whom all the members have

confidence, all the members will gladly give their voice of support to that candidate whom the majority chooses as the most suitable.

Yes, the appointment of the ministry of the Word is the business, right, and obligation of all the members of the congregation. Christ gives this mandate to the entire congregation. He has given to all believers the service of word and sacrament. The congregational members who are entitled to vote and who do vote are simply the natural representatives of the whole congregation. Therefore not only the voting members should be and become one in this business, but also the other members, the women, and the minors should say a heartfelt "Yes" and "Amen" in their hearts to the unanimous congregational decision. To be sure, it is always only the believers who call the pastor. For Christ has handed over the keys and all ecclesiastical authority only to believing Christians. The hypocrites, who are perhaps joined outwardly to the congregation, do not really belong to the church. In truth, before God they are by no means members of the congregation. So if they choose along with the members and vote along with the members, that is no part of the call. They are only doing in pretense what the believers do in reality, and what they in fact do in this business is null and void before God, but they are not hindering the work of God that the congregation of God here accomplishes.

After the selection takes place, the congregation sends out the call to the chosen preacher, namely, the request, "Come, you should become our pastor." It lets him know at the same time what it expects and requests from him, and it promises to him what it owes to him according to God's Word. It is a commendable ecclesiastical custom that it issues to him a formal document of vocation. If then the one chosen, in the name of God, after deliberating thoroughly, has accepted the call and together with it the responsibilities issued in it, and after that he has been introduced to the congregation according to good ecclesiastical custom in the public ordination or installation celebration, then all the members of the congregation should receive him as the Galatian Christians received the apostle Paul, as a messenger of God. They should look upon him from now on as a servant of the church and a servant of Christ and thank God that he has given to them again a suitable teacher and shepherd.

It is a sacred duty of a Christian congregation to establish the public ministry of the Word in its midst and then also to preserve it. Everything that a congregation according to God's Word owes to the chosen preacher and everything to which the congregation obligates itself through the calling serves for the preservation of the ministry of the Word.

To begin with, the congregation should bear in mind that by charging the called preacher with the public service in word and sacrament, it does not relinquish its priestly right and duty. Surely no one should be allowed to teach publicly in the Christian congregation without a call, other than the called preacher. Nevertheless, the congregation is and remains the proper possessor of the power of the keys and of all church authority. The congregation is the mistress, the preachers are the servants of the church. St. Paul writes, "Who now is Paul? Who is Apollos? Servants they are, through whom you have come to believe" (1 Cor. 3:5). "Whether it be Paul or Apollos, Cephas or the world, whether it be life or death, be it the present or the future, all is yours; but you are of Christ, but Christ is of God" (1 Cor. 3:22-23). And thus in return for this gift the congregation is accountable to its Lord Jesus Christ for how its servants are administering word and sacrament. It is a sacred right and a sacred duty of the congregation that it sees to it that its called preacher proclaims the Word of God loudly and clearly and that he administers the Sacrament according to Christ's will. All Christians should watch over and be wardens over this.

All believing Christians are given by God the right to be judges over doctrine. Christ has entrusted the highest judgment to the congregation, when he said, "Tell it to the congregation," which includes the judgment over the doctrine and practice of the pastor. Christ exhorts his disciples, "Watch out for false prophets" (Mt. 7,15). And the apostle exhorts all Christians, "Test the spirits, whether they are from God" (1 John 4,1). All Christians should avoid false doctrine and false teachers, and therefore they must test the doctrine which they hear, and they must test and judge the teachers who preach it to them. For that reason our Lutheran Confessions in the Smalcald Articles declare, "As soon as the proper judgment is taken away from the church, it would make it impossible for the church to restrain false doctrine or improper divine worship, and therefore many souls would be lost." And Luther testifies in his writing against King Henry of England, "To recognize and to judge

doctrine, above all, belongs to all Christians. And you can be sure that the one is cursed who deviates even a little in this right." The commanded office of guardian and judge which has been given to the congregation does not give the members of the congregation the right to perceive and to find fault with everything that the pastor says and does. The members should rather be satisfied when the manager over the secret things of God is found to be faithful. When a preacher administers his office faithfully, then the opinion and judgment of those who hear him, as long as everything is in order in the congregation is expressed through acclamation, agreement, and appreciation. And the good testimony that his congregation gives to him encourages the preacher in his difficult and responsible task. This also serves and helps the preservation of the public ministry of the Word.

The believing Christians are watchmen and judges of doctrine, but at the same time they should be and remain students of the Word. Since it has pleased God to preach his word through men, not through angels, Christians are obligated to believe and follow everything that the called servants in the Word present to them from God's Word as God's counsel and will. It is directed in Scripture, "Obey your teachers and follow them" (Hebrews 13:17). Naturally this obedience only goes so far as the ministry of the preacher extends, and that extends so far as God's Word extends. As often as a Christian hears the preaching of the Word, as often as his pastor in the pastoral care personally brings him God's Word, as often as he teaches him from God's Word, as often as he exhorts, rebukes, consoles, and comforts, the Christian should say to himself, "Thus says my God to me, and that, what God tells me, I must after all obey. I want to follow it with joy." When Christians gladly hear the sermon and God's Word and learn to follow it, then they advance the ministry of the Word. This produces within them the desired fruit, and those outside of Christendom receive the impression that the gospel of Christ is a power of God for salvation, and as a result more and more are added to the congregation. The preacher, however, will experience greater joy in doing his work when he sees that labor in the Lord is not fruitless.

The apostle Paul writes, "The elders, who do their work well, hold them in double honor, especially those who labor there in Word and in teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). A Christian congregation, therefore, owes its preacher esteem and respect. The preacher himself has a high, divine office. He is God's servant, an ambassador for Christ. He stands in God's place, in Christ's place, and the congregation itself has placed him in this office. That he is also a weak, sinful man does his office no detriment. For God has ordained weak, sinful men to be his preachers. As long as a preacher is faithful in his ministry, the congregation should hold him in high esteem. It would be an evil thing to do, if members of the congregation would treat a faithful pastor despicably on the basis of his personal flaws. And it would be a sin and a disgrace if a congregation, which is composed of poor and miserable sinners, would consider their preacher unworthy or unqualified for the ministry, solely because he possesses certain disagreeable qualities, since one can recognize in him the vices of the old Adam. If congregations hold their preachers in honor, then they honor also the ministry of the Word among them.

To the preservation of the ministry of the Word belongs ultimately also what St. Paul impresses upon the Christians in Galatians 6:6, "The one however who is instructed with the Word, let that one share all good things with him who instructs him." Christians receive from their preachers spiritual and heavenly goods, nourishment which feeds and preserves their souls toward eternal life. This service in the congregation takes up all the time and strength of the preacher. Therefore the congregation is obligated to provide him with the nourishment of the body and the necessities of life. A conscientious pastor, who carries in his heart the welfare of all lambs charged to him, has also many concerns of the office on his heart, and he will have to carry many a cross of the ministry. So the congregation should spare him, at the very least, from the cares of providing a livelihood. The apostle attaches to that reminder an earnest warning, "Do not be deceived, God cannot be mocked" (Gal. 6:7). When a congregation allows its preacher to suffer want or does not give him support, or it is insufficient, then the congregation mocks the ministry of the Word, and it mocks God himself, whose office it is. But God himself will not be mocked. Oh! May all Christian congregations well take to heart what Luther writes about this in his Large Catechism, "One thing is needed, to impress on the common people that those who wish to be called Christians owe it to God to give double honor to those who watch over their souls, that they do good to them and they take care of them. Then God will also give to you adequately and will not allow deficiency. But every man himself struggles against and offers resistance against that. All are worried that their stomachs languish away, and that right now they cannot support an honorable preacher, since we have

beforehand filled ten priests' stomachs. We therefore also deserve that God deprive us of his Word and blessings and allow again preachers of lies to arise, who lead us to the devil, and who suck out our sweat and blood."

"Those however who hold God's will and command before their eyes have the promise that they should be richly rewarded, both for what they expend on their earthly and spiritual fathers and what they do to honor them. Not only that, they will receive a year or two of loaves of bread, clothing, and money, but they shall have a long life, nourishment, and peace, and they shall be eternally rich and blessed. Therefore, do what you owe to do, and let God see to it how he will nourish and provide for you. He has promised it and has never before lied, and he will not lie to you now."

May God help all our congregations that they give to the holy ministry of the Word, through which God builds his church on earth, through which he preserves and guides it toward the heavenly goal, and which has been commanded by God, the honor and respect it is due.