

Luther on Call and Vocation - a look at Luther and the Ministry

By Markus Wriedt

1 Introduction

Ecclesiology was not a subject of discussion in the middle ages. „I believe in the one and holy, catholic church“ – with that sentence from the Creed lays and clerics summarized their knowledge and doctrine of the church. Even though several reform movements discussed the concrete ministry in different forms, the lack of pastoral care, and the worldliness of bishops and popes, none of them ever doubted the reality of the one church as base of society and culture, of daily life and political affairs. The unity of religion and non-religious areas was not touched. „religio est vinculum societatis“ – Religion is the angel of society. This proverb clearly illustrates the deep conviction of man in the middle ages – even in the 15th Century when the complaints about the ,real existing church became overwhelming.

Thus Luther’s critique was often understood as a sequel of the late medieval reform discussion about Church, Ministry and the realization of pastoral care deriving from reform movements like for example the Modern Devotion (Devotio Moderna), the Bohemian Brethren and the hussite movement, or the several reform congregations of the mendicant orders. As a member of the last - the reformed congregation of the Augustinian Order - Luther was educated by Staupitz and others in the thoughts of a biblical based reform ,in head and members of the Church. It seems that he concentrated and focused the different attempts for a reform and became – as Heiko A. Oberman provokingly pointed out – a „forerunner of the Reformation“.

With the following presentation I would like to show how much Luther has to be distinguished from his medieval precedents. His critique of the late

medieval church was based on another fundament and destroyed the system of religious and secular unity of the last 1000 years. With Luther, however, a new epoch begun. He was – even though he did not want to become that – the founder of a new understanding of Church and Society.

On the contrary you have to bear in mind that Luther was indeed a man of the late medieval time. Not only, that he was educated by late medieval teachers, monks and professors. He internalized the system of philosophy as much as that of theology, of daily piety as much as of social life, of hope and faith as much as of fright and sorrow, within the understanding of a late medieval individual. When I say ‚individual‘ I am mistaken. Even that, the individual approach was not his starting point but the result of a long lasting process of emancipation and recognition. By the end of his life Luther said, that he was forced into the quarrel by foreign powers. I think, in his understanding Luther is right. The revolving results of the reformation – today’s historians of the reformation discuss these phenomena under the title of „confessionalization“ which means the modernization and introduction of social discipline to the reformed societies – were not completely intended by Luther. He did not want to found a new church; or even worse: a new religion called Protestantism. He wanted to re-form, to bring the established church back to its roots of the consensus *quinesecularis* (the consensus of the first five centuries) and the biblical time. Several of the consequences of his reform attempt he tried to correct. After the diet of Augsburg 1530 at the latest he drew back and saw with great irritation the reformation becoming a secular face.

2 Luther’s understanding of the Ministry

Even though Luther intensified the discussion about church he never wrote a book „de ecclesia“. While he disputed with Cajetan in Würzburg August 1518 the roman legate summarized Luther’s explanation with the sentence „What you say means founding a new church ...“ Luther apologized that he

wanted to reform, but certainly not to break with the roman church which he lifelong accepted as the true, apostolic and catholic church.

Anyway – Luther never explained his biblical understanding of the church as a whole but he articulated several reform ideas within his polemical writings. Interpreting Luther's ecclesiology has to accentuate this literary genre: The Wittenberg Professor wrote polemical writings, aggressive critique and powerful answers to his enemies. Thus he never had time – and a calmed/quiet/peaceful heart – to develop a systematic study. That is one problem of discussing Luther's ecclesiology.

The other lies within the different fronts of his battle for a reform of the church. At least we can name three different front lines: In the first years Luther started to discuss the late medieval understanding of church in the context of his critique of the praxis of indulgence-letters. Starting at the point that there is no biblical legitimating of that praxis he quickly found that the process of legitimization itself caused several problems of understanding the church and its authority. Another frontline was opened in the early twenties when reform orientated radicals spoiled the Wittenberg group of reformers. Not only Karlstadt and Müntzer but also spiritualistic radicals denied the need of ministry and order in an evangelical church. A third frontline distinguished meanings within the reformation group. Luther's understanding of ministry is a result of his struggle for righteousness and his exploration of the 'evangelium'. His distinction between law and gospel as much as the consequences of this finding for a biblical based ethic caused separation and distinction in the group of the Wittenberg reformers. Starting with Agricola and going forth to Major and Melanchthon.

As almost mentioned in the beginning, the starting point of Luther's development is the late medieval ecclesiology concentrating on the terms „potestas ordinis“ and „potestas iurisdictionis“. Potestas – translating the Greek ‚exousía‘ – means the authority and power of the minister. He owns by the way of his ordination or better: consecration the power to

administrate the sacraments and especially the Eucharist understood as holy sacrifice of the blood and body of Christ. The liturgy for the consecration of a priest formulates: „accipe postestatem offerendi sacrificium in ecclesia pro vivis et mortuis in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.“ The authority to be a priest who leads the service is named by potestas ordinis.

The priest not works in church only. One of his most important duties is pastoral care. During the middle ages the term ‚pastoral care‘ – cura animarum – described the duties of a bishop: administration of his dioceses, organization of the service and vocation and installation of different deacons, presbyters, sextons etc. for the manifold assignments in his church area. In the later centuries pastoral care more and more was understood as the duty of a minister to care for the souls of his parishioners. Especially to teach the ecclesiastical doctrine, to guide the searching people and to judge their orientation of life and community became the most essential duty of a priest. He was the guide on their way to salvation. Church became the exclusive ‚mediatrix salvatoris‘. The leading authority of a priest was concentrated in the sacrament of poenitence: He proofed the contrition of the sinner, he gave absolution and he imposed the penalty. Thus the priest became father in faith and judge in one person. The accentuation of the last was intensified in the late medieval times.

So Luther experienced priests, church and especially the pope as the most powerful authority not only concerning questions of religious life but also concerning the question of eternal salvation.

When Luther started to discuss the praxis of indulgence he quickly touched the question of ecclesiastical authority and the ministry of priests. He denied the exclusive understanding of ‚postestas iurisdictionis‘ for the priests only and claimed in his interpretation of Mt 16, 18-19 that Jesus gave the authority not to Peter alone but to all the apostles that means the whole church.

This was the result of the dispute with Alexander Prierias, a poor scholastic theologian who tried to defend the papacy on the grounds of tradition. In his response which was in fact an accusation he claimed five sentences against Luther and other Wittenberg heretics. One of these sentences formulates that those who say, the church is not allowed to do what it is doing be condemned (*anathemata sit*). With that he tried to establish a papalistic traditionalism which Luther destroyed by his arguments based on the Scripture alone. In the following years Luther came to the result that with this argumentation he moves the grounds of the medieval church fundamentally. The discussion about indulgence and biblical proof for the administration of sacraments through priests alone were no longer in the focus. The dispute concentrated more and more on the question who or what has the last authority in Church and society as a whole.

In the early twenties of the sixteenth Century Luther found that Mt. 16, 18f. cannot be used as foundation of the papacy and even not a special ministry. He combined this quotation with Mt 18,18 and Jh 20,22f. and claimed that the authority to bind and solve was given to the church as community: not exclusively to a special person or a ministry:

„All Christians here is given this authority even though several unrighteous claimed this power exclusively for themselves like the pope, bishops and clerics, who claim this power and say it has been given to them alone and not to lay people.“

With that Luther touches the question of what means „church“ and his doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers.

3 Luther and the Priesthood of all Believers

In the year 1520 the Leipzig Franciscan monk Augustin Alfeld provoked Luther with the publication of a pamphlet „about the apostolic see, if it is of divine legitimating or not“. At the end of May, 1520, Luther received a copy.

In this book Alfeld tried to prove on the basis of the Scripture (sic!) that the Papacy is legitimized through divine authority. Therefore Luther has to respect the Pope. He uses a very easy argument: No community can exist without a head which unifies the widespread interests and members. In the Church that one is the Pope. But not only for rational reason also the Scripture proofs this argument: The High priest Aaron is the true model from the old testament for the ministry of Peter. Rome became the New Jerusalem. All true science in the Church has to be based on the teachers of the Church (the Church fathers) as much as true piety is related to the Holiness of Peter and his successors.

Alfeld orchestrated his tract with several biblical quotations and claimed himself to be a theological Alexander the Great who cuts the gordic knot of Luther's ecclesiological problems with seven swords.

Luther was shocked. Not he alone. The academic society was irritated by the poorness of the argumentation and the ridiculous style of Alfeld. Thus nobody was eager to write an answer. Luther left it to his famulus Johannes Lonicer and asked him to write something.

But several days later Alfeld published a German translation of the Latin tract for the Leipzig citizenship and dedicated it to the Major and the members of the curia. Now Luther could no longer keep silent. He wrote his tract „On the Papacy in Rome against the famous Romanist (i.e. roman theologian) in Leipzig.“ We can't follow his arguments throughout this book which seems to me the best ecclesiastical study Luther ever wrote. But we will start our sketch with this tract for Luther gave a brief but fully satisfying definition of what he understood with the word „church“:

Scripture speaks about Christendom very simply and in only one way... [it is] that Christendom means an assembly of all the people on earth who believe in Christ, as we pray in the Creed, „I believe in the Holy Spirit, the communion of saints.“ This community or

assembly means all those who live in true faith, hope, and love. Thus the essence, life, and nature of Christendom is not a physical assembly, but an assembly of hearts in one faith,....“

An assembly of hearts in one faith – that means church. Nothing more. Luther says nothing about ministry, law, order, obedience, councils, household and other things like that. Luther knows about all of these but he concentrates on the biblical fundament to display his vision of a church.

In another book of the year 1520, in his famous *De captivitate Babylonica* (On the babylonic imprisonment of the church) Luther wrote:

It is ashaming and an unrighteous slavery, that a Christian, who is free, is forced under other power and doctrines than heavenly and divine.

In his „On the Freedom of the Christian“ Luther explains this argument more clearly. Church has no authority to judge all dimensions of human life. Church can not promise or give grace. Church is not able to implement new sacraments. Church has no power to found new laws. The administration of the Pope has not the same authority and legitimating as the word of God. His government has to be judged by the scripture and is subordinated the revelation of the divine will in the gospel.

Instead Church has the authority to distinguish clearly the word of god from human sayings. That is the power of the church. There is no other realm for ecclesiastical judgment.

If there is no theological, i.e. biblical based distinction between ecclesiastical ministers and the true believers, and if the church is constituted by the community of hearts in one faith, than there is no legitimating of the distinction between clergy and lays. Luther turns this negative argument positive: The potestas iurisdictionis is given to the church, i.e. all believers. All believers are members of the church through baptism. If all baptized

Christians own the authority of judgment about life and doctrine all believers own the authority of priests. Thus Luther claimed: All baptized are priests and get through baptism and faith part of Christ's ministry as Prophet, King and High priest. Therefore

Everyone, who knows himself as Christian, shall be sure and know for certain, that we are all priests in the same sense, and that we have authority in relation to the word and any sacrament.

Interpreting 1 Peter 2,9 Luther explains:

We are all priest in front of God, as much as we are Christians. For we have been led on the stone which became our high priest we share everything what he owns.

This understanding of the priesthood of all believers implies two dimensions of Christian life: on the one hand the Christians are part of the new folk of God and share its promise for eternal salvation, which Christ had merited for his folks, the church. On the other hand Luther's understanding of the priesthood of all believers implies that the Christians are entitled to its right and duties which were maintained exclusively by the clergy in former times. With that argument Luther destroys the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the fundament of the medieval church.

As a consequence Luther finally denied the legitimacy of the consecration and the linked understanding of the character indelibilis. Ordination is no sacrament. Thus it is an invention of the Church and without divine legitimating. A man becomes priest through baptism:

„We all become priests through the consecration of the baptism.“

This vision of a church constituted by its believers has a strong spiritualistic tendency. Thus it was just a question of time when Luther was confronted with radical consequences of his ecclesiology.

4 The Need for a – special – Ministry

Even though in his early years Luther had accentuated the priesthood of all believers and a more spiritualistic view of the church against Rome he never lost the point of a special ministry in the church. He never denied a special vocation and ordination of individuals for a specific duty. Luther was – as man of the late medieval times– deeply convinced that the church has its own order which had to be followed. Luther already wrote in his babylonian imprisonment of the church:

But is it not allowed that everyone individually uses this potestas without asking the community or without vocation through one of the elders. (Because what belongs to all of a community is not for one alone and he is not allowed to take it exclusively without being vocated to do so)

There are several other passages with the same meaning. Luther pointed on that view of a reform of the church especially against the radical reform movements with spiritualistic or political background like Karlstadt, Stiefel, Zwilling and Müntzer. Already before the outbreak of the Wittenberg disturbances Luther wrote to the Christian nobility:

Because we are all similar as priests none stand up for own reason and without proper consensus of the community and vocation and doing things which everyone can do with the same authority. Those things which are common should none without allowance of the community or with special vocation claim exclusively.

In these contexts the goal of critique is clear: the exclusive self-understanding of the roman clergy. Within the early twenties a new frontline against the mainstream Reformation in Wittenberg was established. On the other side we find a great number of former friends and colleagues of Luther: Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt is the most prominent preacher. He accentuates a merely spiritual understanding of church and ministry and

denies any kind of ritual, order and administrative legitimating. Against those the above mentioned arguments of Luther appear in a new light. Not only the exclusive claim for a special standing and order in society also the radical negotiation of the necessity of a ministry and church ordinances come into the focus.

Quoting 1 Kor 14,40 Luther emphasized two arguments: firstly the publicity of the church life and secondly the general i.e. creational order which God had established and to which Christians as much as heathens need to obey. Both arguments are linked together: the right order in the church is a model for the right order of society. As much as the Christians obey to the divine law as much will the society in which they life flourish and grow. Luther therefore stresses the argument based on the Pauline conception of the early church and argues that the rights and the duties which belong to all Christians similarly for the reason of continuing the right order must be used in a common sense of all members of a congregation.

It seems to be a contradiction: on the one hand Luther argued against the roman clergy for proclaiming a special ministry exclusively and on the other hand he argues for the need of a special ministry. But there is in fact a deeper relation. Luther argues with the priesthood of all believers on the basis of the Scripture against the roman claim of potestas. The special ministry which Luther never denied is necessary to continue the ecclesiastical duties in the reformation.

The modern research calls Luther's view of the ministry ‚functional‘. I doubt that these sociologist categories fit exactly to Luther's understanding. Luther was neither an heir of the Bielefeld school of sociologist nor a systematic theologian. He argues in a controversial context and tries to push the biblical view against the traditionalist interpretation of the roman-catholic theologians. Anyway – what are the main aspects of Luther's understanding of the ministry?

To be a priest means nothing else than to be a minister of the Word. Of the word, I said, not of the Law but of the Gospel.

First of all: the authority of a priest is based on the Word contained in the Scripture. A priest is not priest of its own or participating of the authority of other humans. A priest becomes a priest through the word of promise which has been said to him in the baptism. And this word is the gospel.

Luther's distinction of law and gospel cannot be discussed in full length. Let us briefly sketch Luther's important idea: gospel means in the understanding of Luther the promise of salvation which is brought to mankind through Christ. Thus every sentence of the Bible which leads to the understanding of the incoming salvation of the sinner and the message of the merciful God has to be interpreted as gospel. In opposition to the gospel the law accuses and shows the everlasting sin of mankind. Every sentence of the scripture which leads to the self-understanding of man as a sinner has to be interpreted as law. This distinction is not a static or ontological one but a hermeneutic one: No sentence of the bible owns an objective meaning for it is the lively word of God which is spoken to me in a very special moment and context. Thus a sentence can be heard as gospel and in the same time be understood as law. We had discussed that previously in our last meeting with the example of the first commandment.

Luther's Understanding of the ministry is closely linked to that distinction. The priest has to serve the word. He has to preach the gospel. Again the frontline is clear: it is not the duty of a priest to correct people, to judge their lives and intervene in the concrete planning's. That did the roman clergy with its intervention in political, cultural and other secular belongings. But this did also the radicals by translating the Old Testament orders word by word into the concrete situation of Wittenberg, Mühlhausen or Orlamünde. Instead: The duty of a priest is to take care for the gospel that it is carried out into the world.

This is what some interpreters called a ‚functionalist view‘. I think – as mentioned above – this is not adequate for Luther elaborated this general view as sketched before to a concrete understanding of the duties of a minister which are not fully described by Luther understands the ministry as „the word in function“. We have to look at this in the following:

4.1 Vocation and Ordination

No one can claim the special ministry of serving the word by his own authority. The priest needs to be vocated and ordained. Even though Luther denied a special consecration he emphasized the vocation and demanded a formal act of ordination because of the right order:

„Ordination means nothing else than to call and to order in the ministry of the word.“

We have to distinguish two steps: vocation and ordination.

For Luther the community of all believers has the highest authority – under human condition – in the church: the minister has to be called by the local parish. Responsible for the ministry as a whole is the church which is concrete in the local congregation. Thus the local community has to find its ministers for preaching, teaching, pastoral care etc. After 1527 – after the visitations in Saxony which revealed a disastrous picture of the church in the electoral territory – Luther understood the need of a complete reform and new constitution of the ministry.

Luther said already 1524: „We will preach and ordain in another way as these bishops. Because we have already a ministry, we will ordain on that basis. Ordination does not mean consecration. If we know a pious man, we will call him and give to him in the power of the word what we have already: the authority to preach the word and to distribute the sacraments. That means to ordain.“

Luther realized this understanding of vocation by the ordination of Georg Rörer: He ordained the man on the fourteenth of May, 1524, in the City-Church of Wittenberg as Deacon. After a formal vocation he led his hands on Georg Rörer and prayed for the benediction of God for his ministry.

Even though there was no formal act constituted Luther tried to find a right order. In his formula for the ordination of evangelical ministers and his sermon from October 20, 1535, Luther emphasized three fundamental acts which constitute the ordination:

- a) baptism
- b) vocation or call of a local congregation
- c) legitimating in a public service through a high ecclesiastical authority (bishop, superintendent etc.)

This understanding of ordination implies the obedience to the word of Christ. For Christ is the one who acts through his ministers in the church:

„The ministry is of Christ, who established them.“

4.2 No character indelibilis

Therefore the ordination does not change the character or ability of an ordained Christian. It is the obedience to the vocation of God – formulated in the call of the parish – which demands future obedience to the will of God. Thus a minister can fall like all other Christians by not following the commandment of God but his own understanding and will. To avoid such failure the church has to watch out for candidates who may come in trouble and to protect their parishes as much as themselves from the temptation of the evil.

The priest serves as a minister of the word as long as the parish needs his service. He becomes a normal parishioner – not a lay but a priest as all other priests with him – again in the moment when the parish vocates and

ordaines another candidate or finds strong reason that he does not preach the true gospel.

This argument has an antidonatist accent: The ministry is not linked to any individual constitution of the person who is ordained. Neither is a special ability in need nor does ordination constitutes a special behavior or charisma which is exclusively connected with the minister; as mentioned above.

4.3 The duties of a Minister

The Confession of Augsburg describes the duties of a minister as „*docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta*“ – to teach the gospel and to administrate/distribute the sacrament. This sounds almost similar to the medieval ordination liturgy. But there is an important difference: For Luther and the Wittenberg Reformation the word has the last authority. This authority can not be divided. Thus a minister is subordinated to the word and has to be judged in all dimensions of his life in the light of the Scripture. The minister himself has no power/authority over other people. His duties are to comfort the mourning, to comfort the depressed, to bring the promise of redemption to those who want to be redeemed, to carry out the word of the merciful God and the promise of salvation into the world:

For Christ did not found empires, nor authorities, nor rich and wealthy properties in his church, but he asked for serving ministers as we have learned from the apostles ... he demands faith of the confessing sinner, that this man, when he receives redemption in faith, comes through the promise to deep security of the realization of the salvation in the end of the times. This is not a question of power (potestas), but a question of the ministry of him who can give redemption alone.

„The ministry of the word makes a priest and a bishop“

Luther destroyed the ecclesiastical hierarchies. But he still emphasized the need of different duties in the church. In the roman understanding the full ministry is owned by the pope. He divides his power and authority to the bishops and them again to their clergy. Thus a pyramid-shaped model of the ecclesiastical hierarchies with the pope at its top and the deacons etc. down to the bottom describes the roman system.

Luther turned this system upside down. With respect to the early church (*ecclesia primitiva*) he understands the Christian hierarchy as a functional relationship and not as an order of individual dignity and ability. On top are the believers, the community of hearts in one faith. It divides its authority to the called and ordained ministers. They again elect one candidate as pastor *pastorum*, as bishop or superintendent. He has to serve as minister *ministorum*. What are his duties?

In several letters Luther addresses his friends, colleagues and other priests as „bishop“. It is astonishing how many people Luther called „bishop“. What did this address imply for Luther's understanding of the leading ministry in church? Let me briefly sketch the result of the analysis of his letters:

- a) Because Luther addressed several non-bishops as ‚episcopus‘ we can find an outline of his understanding of the leading ministry in the church. But because he used this title without a real system, we have to be quite careful not to over interpret these letters.
- b) It seems clear that Luther addresses ministers of cities as bishops or superintendent. But the rule cannot be turned around: Luther does not address every minister of a city as bishop. Even though the title of a minister of a city as a bishop drives back to the ancient times of the old church we do not have a real proof that Luther saw this link.

- c) A survey over the letters in which Luther used „bishop“ as title for a minister gives a brief sketch of that what Luther outlined as the duties of a leading minister:

He has to administrate and to organize the local congregation. Luther emphasized especially the necessary reform of liturgy, preaching and teaching and the abolition of biblically not legitimized rites and cults.

The bishop has to find the right candidates for the manifold duties in his congregation: teacher, preacher, sextons, deacons, etc. He has to care for these ministers, to guarantee their income, to care for their families, to judge about their teaching and preaching.

The bishop has to mediate between departed colleagues and to settle discussion over the right interpretation of the gospel and the doctrine by arbitration. He also has to mediate between ecclesiastical and secular interests and authorities.

The bishop has to teach and to preach. His ministry is based on the ministry of his priests. Thus he has to be a forerunner and model of their administration.

The bishop has to care not only for his ministers but also for difficult cases in his parish, especially questions of marriage and divorce.

The bishop represents the congregation in ecumenical contexts: with other parishes or with other churches.

There is no clear distinction between a minister and a bishop in the light of Luther's letters. A closer look into his books and tracts does not answer the question more satisfying. It seems that Luther does not want to distinguish

clearly for he understands the bishop as a minister and a minister as a priest like all other Christians. Their duties distinguish the ministers functionally but not on the basis of a different condition. Luther kept his view of the ministry open. This can be understood in the light of the beginning reformation and the at least chaotic situation in several parishes in Saxony.

The result might be explained by a general hesitation of Luther to fix administrative orders. They easily can become the new law which extinguishes the flame of the gospel in the church.

5 Outlook

I tried to show Luther's vision of an evangelical church and how he understood the ministry. There are two lines which are closely intermingled: the one line is Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. The other line is his conviction of the need of the ministry. These two lines are not contradicted, they complete each other. This can be seen if one looks to the controversial background in which Luther accentuates one or the other. Against Rome Luther emphasized the priesthood of all believers to correct the unbiblical understanding of the clergy and the ecclesiastical hierarchies. Against the radicals and spirituals Luther stressed the argument for an ordained ministry to avoid spiritualistic chaos or radical revolts.

It became the duty of Philipp Melanchthon, Nikolaus Amsdorf and others to establish an evangelical church. They did it by correcting, concentrating, interpreting and discussing the position of Luther. It is clear that they did not establish a Lutheran church – even though it was called so later on. What they did was to realize a highly polemical and prophetic sketch Luther left to them. Thus it seems inappropriate to argue with Luther with the results of the reformation or to argue against Melanchthon and his followers on the basis of Luther's early tracts and sermons. The situation had changed and new challenges provoked new answers.

Therefore I can't say that Luther's ecclesiology has to be explored as the solution of the problems of our churches today. We might read Luther as a witness of true belief, as a preacher of the gospel. We might find with Luther a way back into the scripture and through the word the solution of our problems. Don't make Luther a saint. But let Luther be what he became for Lutherans and Christians of other denominations:

a father in faith.