

## The Holy Spirit and ministry: a Lutheran perspective

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# The Holy Spirit and Ministry

## A Lutheran Perspective

DR BERND OBERDORFER

What is ministry? What does ordination mean? We all know that these are matters of the greatest importance to the ecumenical dialogues in our time and age. Not only are there many differences in the practice and structure of ordained ministry between our churches, but there are also theological differences in understanding the meaning of ministry and ordination, its function and its proper place in the church. Many people think that these questions are crucial for all hopes to find a way to the visible unity of the church. And indeed it was, for example, the dissent in the understanding of ministry that made the Roman Catholic Church prohibit mutual eucharistic hospitality at the *Ökumenische Kirchentag* in Berlin in 2003. Yet it sometimes seems that the debates on that topic have come to a dead end. All attempts to overcome the gap between the Protestant focus on the ministry as being a function of the common priesthood of all Christians, and the Roman Catholic focus on the hierarchical priesthood as being a specific representation of Christ, seem to have failed. How should the *defectus ordinis* which is diagnosed by the Roman Catholic Church in the churches of the Reformation be healed if these churches, according to their ecclesiology, cannot see such a *defectus* in their doctrine of ministry and therefore do not feel any necessity for a “healing” of this kind?

In a situation like this, in my opinion it is wise to start anew by embedding the question of ministry in broader and deeper theological investigations on the nature of the church. The Faith and Order document *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* bases its reflections upon the formula that the church is *creatura Verbi et creatura Spiritus*, and that seems to me a very appropriate starting-point because it emphasizes that the church has its being only through the graceful presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit. We cannot understand the nature of the church unless we understand the meaning of this presence. To say it briefly: We have to start with God. In other words, we have to enquire

as to the roots of the church in the communion and community of the triune God. In the first section of my paper, I would like to begin with some reflections on the mutuality of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the history of revelation, and then give an outline of the work of the Holy Spirit in the church in order to display the meaning of the Spirit for the life of the church. In the second part, I would like to focus on the church as a unity and community which is differentiated in itself by the many gifts and charismata. With this basis, I will deal with the specific function of the ordained ministry in my third section, before ending with some reflections on ministry and apostolicity.

### The church as *creatura Verbi et creatura Spiritus*

#### 1. *The church as creatura gratiae redemptionis (creature of the grace of redemption)*

The church is *creatura*. This is not a trivial claim. It does not simply mean that the church, being part of the world, is creature in the sense any other part of the world is. But the church is rather *creatura* in an eminent sense. It owes its being only and totally to the justifying and renewing grace of God. It is creature of God who has promised to make everything anew. It is *new* creature amidst the old. Although the church is an earthly reality, its existence is not at all a possibility of the natural world. Although it consists of natural persons, it is not their natural freedom of choice which brings them together into the community of the church. It emerges from nature, but it is not nature. Thus, the church is not primarily a creature of the Creator, but a creature of the Redeemer. Therefore, in order to understand what the church is, we have to ask what redemption is, and that means who the Redeemer is. This leads us to a trinitarian understanding of God.

In all Christian traditions, it is clear that the work of redemption is especially a work of the Son and the Holy Spirit (who both are sent by the Father to reveal and realize his saving grace). The question is how to understand the “and”? Obviously, there are differences in emphasis. The Lutheran tradition, for example, emphasized the church being a *creatura Verbi*. This does not mean that the Holy Spirit is irrelevant to Lutherans. But they always insisted that the Spirit comes only “through” the Word<sup>1</sup> and reveals itself only by revealing the Word. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. Therefore, Lutherans tend to distrust any reflection on the Spirit and its specific work in itself as being in danger of loosening the link between the Spirit and Christ. This is an important aspect of the Lutheran position in the *filioque* debate. The Orthodox tradition, however, emphasizes the *spiritual*

character of the church. The church is *creatura Spiritus* and is graced by the *pleroma* of the Holy Spirit which is present in its liturgy and life. Evidently, this is not supposed to qualify the meaning of Christ. But Orthodox theology has always stressed that Christ himself fulfilled his redeeming work "in the power of the Spirit", and so the biblical story of the transfiguration on Mount Tabor became crucial for the Orthodox understanding of Christ and of God's presence in the world. Orthodox theologians therefore tend to doubt whether the Western churches sufficiently realize this spiritual character of Christ and of the community of the church as being God's new creature. We can see this difference in emphasis already in the old debate on the use of *azyma* in the eucharist.

But I would like to point out that there is a necessary mutuality of Christ and the Spirit in the *Heilsgeschichte*, and to consider that mutuality can help us to understand better the trinitarian being of the Son and the Holy Spirit itself as well as the nature of the church as *creatura Verbi et Spiritus sancti*.

## 2. *The mutuality of Christ and the Holy Spirit*

We can see the mutuality of Christ and the Holy Spirit in Christ's life as well as in the life of the church. All biblical testimonies unanimously show that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, in the power of the Spirit. After his baptism, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit came upon him, and the voice from heaven identified him as the beloved Son. It was then that his redeeming work began. According to Luke, the Spirit inspires his being from the very beginning. The angel tells Mary, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Jesus himself says that the kingdom of God has come since he has cast out the devils "by the Spirit of God" (Matt. 12:28). Jesus is led and inspired by the Spirit, and he brings the Spirit which the prophets announced for the end of the days. So Jesus also reveals the Spirit.

This mutuality is crucial for the life of the church. "No one can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Spirit," Paul writes (1 Cor. 12:3). But on the other hand, we have to be *told* by the word that it is the Spirit who opens up our heart for the word. This can be seen clearly in the story of Pentecost. Peter has to *explain* what had happened when the disciples started to speak in foreign tongues or rather were understood by foreigners in their talking. And Peter explains it with reference to the holy scripture, especially to Joel's prophecy of the Spirit's

arrival in the final days. So we can say: Jesus sends the Spirit who makes Jesus present to us and makes us understand who Jesus is. The Spirit identifies the word (and the meaning of the word), and the word identifies the Spirit. And both of them reveal God as the caring and loving Father.

But let us have a closer look at what the Spirit's work is towards and in the church.

### 3. *The Holy Spirit and the church*

Certainly, God's will is to redeem the whole world (cf. John 3:16). But he starts realizing that aim by electing the church as a *communio sanctorum*, which means both the congregation of the saints and participation in holiness or, we can also say, participation in the Holy Spirit. The church, as Vatican II put it, is a sign of and an instrument for the unity of humankind. And, I would add, it is a sign of and instrument for the eschatological fulfilment God has promised to realize. But as such a sign, the church is already a form of the presence of that fulfilment. The church is an eschatological community amidst history. It is an eschatological community by recalling Christ's redeeming work and announcing Christ's final *parousia* in the end of the days. The church is the community in which the past and the future of salvation is present right now amidst history. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

This work is a complex one. At least three aspects have to be named:

1. The Spirit reveals God and God's will of salvation and redemption which is realized in Jesus Christ. Thus, the Spirit leads people to know God, to be certain of and trust in his saving grace. In other words, the Spirit creates faith – which has an intellectual and an emotional dimension: faith means both understanding God's will and trusting in God.
2. The Spirit renews and revives. The Spirit does not only give a new understanding of God, the self and the world to human persons, but it really changes them. Justification does not only simply declare people as being just (that would be a misunderstanding of the *iustitia externa*), but actually makes people just. Justification is *vivification*. It gives *new* life amidst the old one. Obviously, this new life is a spiritual life. But that does not mean that it is invisible at all. It is not supposed to be hidden in the depth of the souls of the individual believers only to result in a different *world-view*, but rather tends to be shown and communicated in words of testimony and deeds of love.

3. The Spirit creates community. The Spirit not only renews the individual souls but also (and at the same time) forms a community of those who share the faith in the redeeming God. The Spirit establishes a new “people of God”, and as well as Christ, as we can read in the letter to the Ephesians, “has broken down the middle wall of partition between” Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14), and the Spirit unites people from all the different races and religious and cultural backgrounds. Whereas God, in order to prevent humankind from finishing the project of the tower of Babel, had to confound their language and to scatter them “upon the face of all the earth” (Gen. 11:7-8), God now reunites them in the power of the Spirit. No one is excluded from the community of God any longer due to restrictions caused in the circumstances and conditions of his or her physical or natural life. Unification, however, does not mean standardization. The church is not a homogeneous community but, on the contrary, a community in which the people are encouraged to practise their special skills and different talents and even to cultivate their individual and cultural identity in order to build the “body of Christ” and thereby unfold the richness of the Creator’s gifts. Thus, by transforming the natural gifts to *charismata*, the Spirit forms the church as being a “city on the hill”, a witness of the grace of God, a light that shines “upon the face of all the earth”.

#### *4. The Holy Spirit as Christ’s presence*

The church witnesses Christ as God’s presence in the world, and by doing that the church is the continuation of Christ’s incarnation. But this continuation is a spiritual one, it is realized and mediated by the Spirit. Christ sends the same Spirit, which has come upon him and made him the Christ, to the people. He transmits his own Spirit. He promises that he will be present himself in the Spirit he sends. The Spirit, thus, is the form of Christ’s presence after his return to the heavenly Father.

Yet, although the continuity between Christ and the church is a spiritual one, the Spirit nevertheless is given to natural persons. The church, therefore, is – albeit spiritual – an earthly reality. “They are not from the world, but they are in the world,” Jesus says according to St John (John 17:16,11). The church is an earthly reality in which heaven is mirrored. In other words, the church is an earthly community under the opened heaven.

This point seems to be trivial but is of crucial relevance to the understanding of the church and the Spirit’s work in it. Because, although it is the Spirit who makes Christ present in the church, the

Spirit does not do that beyond the structures of earthly human life. The Spirit is not a spiritualist. The continuity between Christ and the church is realized by the Spirit by means of historical continuation. This was the fundamental insight of the 2nd-century church fathers. Confronted with the Montanists' claim that the *Paraclete* directly spoke to their prophets and revealed his will through them without reference to the "old traditions", the fathers understood that just as Christ was incarnated, so also the gospel of Christ is communicated in a way that is somehow carnal. We can say: they discovered apostolicity. They saw that beyond the simple claim to be inspired there must be criteria to discern right from wrong spirits, to ensure that it is really the Spirit of Christ who speaks to us in the present time. And these criteria must entail the dimension of historical verification. This was the time when the New Testament canon was formed and the idea of apostolic succession was born. These means were supposed to guarantee that the claim of having the Spirit of Christ cannot be based on private revelations only but can be proven publicly. If such a claim does not correspond to the apostolic witnesses documented in holy scripture, and if the person who claims having the Spirit does not affiliate with a congregation which represents the apostolic tradition, then it is not the Spirit of Christ speaking through that person.

The church, to summarize, is a spiritual reality which necessarily has a visible, earthly dimension. We cannot have the Spirit beyond this earthly dimension. The Spirit uses natural persons and their talents to communicate the gospel of Christ and communicates that gospel within a chain of historical continuity. In the following, I will unfold the idea of the church as the "body of Christ", i.e., as a differentiated community which as a whole witnesses to that apostolic continuity, before I ask what is the special function of the ordained ministry within that spiritual community.

### **The church as differentiated community: the One Spirit and the many charismata**

"Endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," we read in the letter to the Ephesians. "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and in you all" (Eph. 4:4-6). Undoubtedly, there is an emphasis on the unity of the church in the New Testament. But as we can see particularly in 1 Corinthians 12, it is a structured unity, a unity which entails, even encourages diversity and differentiation. "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit," Paul writes. "And there are differences of

administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all" (1 Cor. 12:4-6). Although there is a basic unity of all Christians because they are all baptized, there are differences of gifts, administrations and operations. Not every member of the church is capable of every work.

Paul's intention, however, is to show that differences of function do not mean differences of hierarchy. Paul explains this by using the metaphor of the body. Every part of the body has its special function which is necessary for the well-being of the body. The members of the body are dependent on the different members doing their specific work. It would be naive if one part of the body declared itself independent of the others' existence. "The eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of thee. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary" (1 Cor. 12:21-22). But it would also be naive if the members ceased to carry out their respective task and rather started to do the work of the member which appears to be the most respected. "If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?... And if they were all one member, where were the body?" (1 Cor. 12:17). The body would collapse if the members did not cooperate by doing their respective work. Paul explicitly says that God "has set the members every one of them in the body, and it hath pleased him" (1 Cor. 12:18). And because every member has a function, which is necessary to the whole body, it is rather realism than moralism when Paul writes, "Whether one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Cor. 12:26).

But although this metaphor seems quite evident in itself, questions arise if we ask what it actually means with reference to the social reality of the church. Do the "members" of the body mean persons, or do they rather mean functions? If it means persons, then we can distinctively and exclusively ascribe one specific function to one concrete person. What is allowed to one person is not allowed to another. If it means functions, however, this strict distinction is not necessary. Then we could say that there are different functions in the congregation which must not be mixed, but need not be ascribed to one person exclusively. For example, we could say that it is necessary to preach the gospel in the congregation, but not necessary to give only one person the right to do that.

There is another question of equal importance: Are there functions which are essential to the life of the church, so that, without them, the church would not be church in full sense? Most of the churches only

define one function to be necessary in a strict sense: the function of public preaching. Yet, as to the concrete description of this function, the different confessions give characteristically different answers.

The Orthodox and the Roman Catholic traditions insist that the ministry of the bishop as the successor of the apostles is essential to the church. The Lutheran church declares the *ministerium docendi evangelium et porrigendi sacramenta* to be necessary, but gives no definite answer of how to organize that *ministerium*. The *Confessio Augustana* only states that everybody who publicly preaches the gospel and celebrates the sacraments has to be *rite vocatus* (CA 14), i.e., appointed according to the rules. Apart from the fact that there has to be someone to perform that function *rite vocatus*, the organization of the ecclesiastical life belongs to the human traditions which are open to changes within history, and diversities referring to these human traditions, according to CA 7, do not endanger the unity of faith. Thus, the German Lutheran churches, during the many centuries when they had no bishops, did not hesitate to regard themselves as being church in a full sense. The Calvinist tradition, however, derived from the Bible the normative concept of a fourfold ministry of pastor, teacher, deacon and elder. But during its history, this concept was realized in quite different ways – which, by the way, shows that it is not too easy to derive from the Bible one and only one model of the structures of the church. The Reformed churches would not contest churches without that structure of ministry to be churches in the full sense.

We may ask why most of the confessional traditions do not unfold a detailed picture of the structures of the church apart from the ordained ministry. This seems to depend on the fact that the ordained ministry in a special sense takes responsibility for the task the whole church is called to fulfil: witnessing the gospel. So we have to ask: What is that “special sense”, and how is it related to the general calling of the church? In other words: How are the common priesthood of all Christians and the specific function of the ordained ministry related to each other?

### **The Holy Spirit and ordained ministry**

The church, as I have stated, is sign of and instrument for the eschatological fulfilment God has promised to realize. As being a *creatura Spiritus*, it reveals God’s saving and redeeming grace which has definitely become real in the incarnation of his beloved Son Jesus Christ. In the power of the Spirit, the church as a whole is witness of that grace. Every Christian participates in the Holy Spirit by being baptized. The Spirit transforms the natural skills and talents of individuals

to use them as witnesses of the divine grace. As faith implies understanding, we have to ascribe to every Christian a common knowledge of the spiritual reality the church has to confess. All Christian traditions know of that common knowledge and honour it. The Orthodox tradition speaks of the *pleroma* of the church which, for example, makes it necessary that the decisions of synods and councils are accepted by the members of the church before they become valid. The Roman Catholic tradition knows of the *sensus fidelium* which, although not binding to the church ministry in a strictly juridical sense, is of great relevance to the teaching of the official church ministry. The Lutheran tradition emphasizes the common priesthood of all Christians which is based on the one baptism. There is no need of a special priesthood to mediate between the Christians and Christ. This implies, albeit not the end, but a deep change in the understanding of the ordained ministry – a change, however, the Protestant Reformers insisted to be a return to the fundamental tradition of the early church.

Luther said, “All Christians are priests, but not all of them are pastors.” All Christians participate in the Spirit which enables them to witness. But not all of them are supposed to preach publicly in the congregational service. Within the body of Christ, there is a special calling to the public preaching and teaching of the gospel and the public celebration of the holy sacraments. This is a matter of the church’s order. There must be someone who takes responsibility for the public witness. This entails a special responsibility for the synchronical and diachronical unity of the church. That means that the minister’s duty is to take care of the catholicity and apostolicity of the church. The minister, therefore, has to be well educated in biblical studies, the history of the church, its doctrinal traditions and its contemporary doctrine. The minister has to take care that his or her congregation does not separate from the community of the catholic and apostolic church.

This task is necessary to the church, and to perform it is a special gift of the Spirit, a *charisma*. But this charisma does not imply the idea that the pastor represents Christ and his redeeming and reconciling work in a special or even exclusive way. The minister fulfils in a special, namely public, way what in principle every Christian is capable and entitled to fulfil.

Because of that, gender is not decisive to the capability of being minister. If all Christians, male or female, are deemed worthy of witnessing Christ, then all of them, men or women, can be called into ordained ministry. Female gender does not belong to the natural factors that make it impossible to witness Christ publicly. If the minister

does not represent Christ exclusively, and if every Christian represents Christ in a special way, then the fact that Jesus was male cannot be an argument against women being ordained. Also the fact that Jesus only chose twelve men to be his apostles need not necessarily be interpreted in the sense that he explicitly wanted to exclude women.

Obviously, there is a tension between this understanding of ordained ministry and the Roman Catholic as well as the Orthodox understanding of the ordained priesthood. This tension, as I would think, derives, *inter alia*, from a different understanding of the visible signs of apostolicity. Let me end my paper with some reflections on this point.

### **Ministry and apostolicity**

The continuity between Christ and the Christians, I stated, is mediated through the Holy Spirit. Yet the Spirit works not beyond but in and with natural persons and structures. Therefore, this continuity must have an earthly, visible dimension. The apostolicity of the church, i.e., the loyalty to its apostolic origins, has to be visualized. There must be visible signs of apostolicity which display the identity of the church during all the centuries of its existence.

All Christian traditions agree that the loyalty to holy scripture is such a sign. Confessing the common faith in the words of the old creeds – as the symbol of Nicea-Constantinople or the Apostles Creed – unites contemporary Christianity with its apostolic heritage. Praying the Lord's prayer, Christianity shares the Spirit, in the power of which Christ could call God his Father. Celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's supper in the way Jesus introduced it on the "night in which he was betrayed" (1 Cor. 12:23) also is an act which makes the identity of the church visible.

For some relevant traditions, particularly the Roman Catholic, the Orthodox and the Anglican, the apostolic succession, i.e., the unbroken chain of bishops being ordained by bishops, beginning with the apostles, is an important and even necessary sign of the apostolic continuity. They regard the bishops as successors and representatives of the apostles. Just as Christ chose twelve apostles who had a special function among his many disciples, so the bishops have a special function, a special charisma within the community of the church, namely, according to Christ's commandment, "to feed his lambs" (John 21:15); that means, to take care of the truth of the gospel that the Christians are taught. And ordination does not only symbolize, but rather transmits, this charisma, this special gift of the Spirit who is present in it. Thus, according to their conviction, without having the ministry of

the bishop and without these bishops being part of that unbroken chain, a church lacks apostolic continuity.

It was one of the crucial experiences of the Reformers that the fact of having ordained bishops was not a guarantee of loyalty to the apostolic truth. The old sentence "the church is where the bishop is" lost its binding plausibility: where the bishops were, there the Reformers could not recognize the true church, and where the Reformers were, there was no bishop. Moreover, with reference to the tradition of the ancient church, the Reformers used the terms "bishop" and "pastor" or "minister" as being synonymous. Every pastor is the bishop of his congregation, and the bishop is a pastor with a specific task of leadership. So, although ordaining pastors without bishops being present, they were convinced that they remained in the apostolic continuity which is based upon loyalty to the gospel as witnessed in holy scripture. Anyway, there is no historical evidence of the chain of episcopal succession being unbroken in any of the traditions.

It can hardly be denied that the differences between the churches, referring to this point, are strong and deep. But let me try to summarize some aspects which might be helpful in opening up further discussions:

1. The Reformers agreed that there is a special charism of publicly preaching and celebrating the sacraments in the church, which is the *ratio essendi* of the ordained ministry. The church has and must have ministers.
2. The Reformers practised ordination in the sense of the *rite vocatus*. Everyone who preaches in the name of the church has to be officially called and introduced to this ministry. They were convinced that this ordination implies a special blessing by the Holy Spirit.
3. Although the Reformers did not regard the episcopal succession as being a necessary sign of apostolic continuity, they practised a kind of presbyterial succession (pastors ordained pastors). To see that might, on the one hand, help the churches with episcopal succession to acknowledge the legitimacy of the ministry in the Protestant churches in the past and present, and it might on the other hand encourage the churches of the Reformation to think about *successio apostolica* as being one (if not necessarily the only) possible sign of the Spirit's presence in church *per saecula saeculorum*.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Confessio Augustana*, art.5.