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The Living Word

*A Theological Study of
Preaching and the Church*

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What is primary is the Word, which is destined to endure as long as humanity endures; the means by which it presses forward is the messengers who hold the office of preaching the Word. With the coming of the Word, the Church arises in all nations. We are not to think first of an outgoing Church and then of its message, the Word. The Word is no other than the creative Word, which took flesh in Christ and now goes out to his world. First of all is the Word, before it is only chaos. The Word creates, the Word sustains (John 1.3; James 1.18; I Peter 1.23-25).¹



2. The authority of the ministry

Discussion of such questions proceeds on the presupposition that the Word is *clear*. The Bible has its climax in a message which is perfectly plain, but which raises a headwind when it is sent forth into the world just because it is so plain. Humanity is unreconciled, bound, opposed to God, in need of redemption—therefore the Lord *sends* his messengers, therefore the preacher must rely on his commission, his sending—in other words, on his ministry. To the Word the ministry belongs. A totally different view of the ministry emerges when the Bible is regarded as obscure, as the locked box that no ordinary man can open. In that case there is an idealization of a human function, the function of the interpreter, because the ministry is regarded as primary: to the ministry the Word belongs, the ministry holds sway over the Word. 'Understanding the Scriptures' is regarded as something unbelievably difficult so that *something else* may be held as holy: the box must be locked so that the opener, the possessor of the key, may be held in honour and esteem. Those who stand for this ideology are to be recognized by the fact that in discussion of the Bible's message they only waken to life

The need of an ecclesiastical succession implies doubt about the living Christ: the theological basis for such a succession is that Christ *was once* alive and established a ministry which later was passed on by means of a visible ecclesiastical causal chain—a belief which is essentially akin to belief in a verbally, inspired book handed down to us.

¹ Put together the concept of creation and the missionary command, as the Early Christians did, so that the Gospel is thus given direct and immediate relation to the world, the heathen world, and it becomes easier to understand how firm and strong are the foundations of the World Church without apostolic succession. But nowadays the Gospel is regarded as bound up with 'the churches' and thus these churches are regarded as missionary bodies. The modern tendency away from special missionary societies towards the Church's own missionary work cannot itself make us think along Biblical lines, for the Word remains strangely imprisoned in pious human organizations. The old missionary society has become sufficiently 'churchy', but at the same time the churches have become missionary societies. Eighteenth-century speech is a sticky dough from which our generation has not succeeded in extricating itself.

and take an interest when it is apparent that two or more interpretations of the meaning of the Bible are possible. 'See', they say to themselves, 'someone must decide who is in the right; someone is *the authority*, the only question is who it is.' They never regard *the Bible* as the judge, and the lack of agreement as itself a witness to that fact, but always regard the authorized interpreter as the judge, and their highest ambition is to avoid the unauthorized interpreters, to avoid listening to more than one authority.¹ They fail to understand that thereby they cut themselves off from the possibility of listening to the Bible and set up a human entity as lord over the Scriptures and as their own lord—lock up the Word and lock up themselves. Some adherents of the ideology of the locked box look up to the ecclesiastical teaching ministry as the holder of the keys, others regard the one who is truly converted, truly born again, the pneumatic, with the same devotion. With respect to the principle involved there is no difference in this regard between the High Church and Pietism, between the institutional church and the 'gathered' church. The theology of apostolic succession and the theology of the regenerate have been minted in very different atmospheres, but in both cases the Word is placed under a guardian.

We have, however, seen earlier that the message of the Bible is clear. The clarity of a matter does not mean that all are united about it, nor that anyone bows in his heart before the claim it makes. Men are often in disagreement about the clearest matters and they often hear something whose correctness is apparent without acting in conformity thereto. Preaching has vast tasks in every generation in spite of the Bible's clarity, for preaching is not first of all a work of enlightenment of an intellectual nature, but is God's action against a demonic *realm* in which man is, and which actively upsets even the interpretation of the Bible and sets the spirit of division loose in the Church, to split asunder the Body of Christ and once more crucify and slay him. So the clear Word has a ministry, which is the ministry of the Word, the ministry of preaching. The reason for the ministry is not that the Word is unclear so that one needs to go to the ministry instead of direct to the Word to listen to it—in that case there would be much reason to talk about 'the word of

¹ The question of authority is for the ideology we are considering the only really serious question; diversity of interpretation is accordingly a very burning issue. If the Word is, on the contrary, conversation with man's heart and conscience, it will quickly be seen that the Word speaks even when the interpreters are in disagreement. Indeed, sometimes the revelation of the Word becomes fully evident only when interpreters disagree, and it is seen that they disagree about the meaning of the Word—and therefore bow before the Word in the midst of their strife, so that no man, but only the Word, is holy. Then it is understood that the Word holds Christ as Lord over all.

the Ministry', rather than 'the ministry of the Word'. The ministry derives its authority from the message. It is wholly wrongheaded to derive the authority of the Word from the ministry. Allow that reversal, and the Church becomes superior to the Word and Christ is locked up in the Church instead of being its Lord. Often nowadays in Sweden, the Church is thus regarded as superior to the Word in spite of the fact that there is no support for that in the Bible, or in the Reformation, or in the constitution of the Swedish Church. It must, indeed, be questioned if the fact that quite by chance in the sixteenth century the Swedish Church preserved the apostolic succession has not been a positive source of damage to the spiritual development of our Church in the last decade and led it along false paths which bring us to inner uncertainty and division.¹ There are in Europe Church bodies whose constitutions allow succession to have an essential place. But a Church such as the Swedish cannot suddenly incorporate into itself a mode of thought that drives the Reformation message from its central position without setting up thereby an inner crisis. A choice must be made. If the choice is based on the Bible there is no shadow of doubt what the result will be.

That it is a matter of 'either-or', and that there can be no wobbling about between both, is specially evident when both theses are formulated negatively. Luther, for his part, could see the Church of Christ even in the Rome of the Pope, because the *Word* was there. Where the Gospel is heard and where the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution, there Christ comes through the mist of false theology which is hung over the Word, baptism, and the Lord's Supper: the faith of the heart can hear the Gospel in all such bodies and can lay hold on the promises of the Word. There is, of course, need to eliminate false usages from such a body, and to make the message of the Scriptures clear to all by straightforward preaching.² But a Lutheran theologian can never regard another Church in such a way as to believe that it lacks something that it must be for us Lutherans to provide. It is the Word that has primacy over the Church and those Church members in the other body do, indeed, to hear the Word; they only need understand something

¹ It happens that the confusion is most evident in the conception of the sacraments and in worship, but it cannot be restricted to that; theological principles, by inner necessity, seek to cover everything. *One* position at any rate is hopeless—eclecticism. Certain conceptions are simply impossible to combine. That is the case with the conception of succession and that of the Word as the basis of the Church. The one totally excludes the other.

² It ought to be noted that Luther never left the Church of Rome. Within the Church he preached what he believed he found in the Scriptures—and was driven out.

that is already theirs. This freedom in our relation with others is a gift of the Word.¹ No one is so free and so bound as he who is rooted in the Word. The situation changes entirely when Church or ministry is set above the Word. Then the source of life of the Church is no longer in something that comes to the Church and creates the Church but is *in* itself, once and for all deposited *in* the Church by Christ. If then any body has, on the way between Christ and the present day, lost succession, it cannot derive the true and genuine life of the Church from the Word, nor from baptism, nor from the Lord's Supper; what is lost is lost until the right ministry is brought from some other undamaged Church.²

We do not intend, at this point, to enter on a discussion with European churches that think along these lines. Carrying on such a debate would be a task in itself. What we intend to emphasize is something different: that this conception of the ministry is incompatible with the central message of the Lutheran Reformation, incompatible with our confessions, and devoid of support in the Bible.³ To adopt such an ideology about the ministry now would be to abandon the line followed by the Swedish Church for 400 years. The confused eclecticism that prevails on occasions in Sweden about such questions is due entirely to the fact that the two positions have not been thought through, nor their incompatibility seen.

It is an entirely different matter that the Word cannot be conceived apart from the Church. In the conception of the Word the conception

¹ The Swedish Church, therefore, finds it no problem how far she is to recognize the Church of England. She does that freely and willingly on the basis of her own presuppositions and without for a moment looking at the matter from the Anglican standpoint—that is, without attaching any significance to her own possession of succession. Were she to regard the possession of succession as essential to her own existence as a church, she would have to regard the Churches of Denmark and Norway as defective. If such a doctrine finds its way into Northern Lutheranism, the Reformation message will have been quite washed away. Sweden's Church, in entire freedom, is in full communion with both the Lutheran and Anglican Churches. She would not enjoy more freedom, but less, were she to adopt a point of view about her past that is foreign to her, since she would thereby introduce a clear contradiction into her own house. We may very well feel pleased with the Swedish succession, as something significant from an ecumenical point of view, and yet hold a conception of the nature of the Church wholly true to the Bible and the Reformation without any compromise with the Anglican conception.

² As soon as this negative sentence has been formulated the possibility of formulating without any qualification the positive sentence that the Word and the sacraments constitute the Church is destroyed.

³ Even to Irenaeus the concept of the ministry here being discussed was unknown. There are elements in Irenaeus' theology not to be met with in the Reformation, but taken as a whole there is no element which *conflicts* with the Reformation.

of the Church is also included. It does not follow from this that the Word has its basis in the Church just as the Church has its basis in the Word, so that some sort of dialectical relation should exist between the conception of the Word and the conception of the Church. A father or mother cannot be thought of without thinking of a child but the relation between the two sides is simple, undialectical, and irreversible—the child derives his life from the parents, never the other way round.¹

The Church, then, draws its life from the Word, never the other way round. Any other view results in an empty conception of the Word—a 'Word' which somehow arises in the course of history, so that a 'Church' can exist before it. But the Word in the Church is the creative Word, from which man and the world take their beginning. The Word took fleshly form in the man Jesus, arose with life from the dead, and now is heard in the preaching to which I listen, thanks to the action of him who is risen in sending it forth. Christ is in the Word, and sustains the Church—that is to say, he creates us men anew through his creative Word. The order in the relation between the Word and the ministry, as between the Word and the Church, is irreversible. If the Word is here, then an unbroken relation with Christ exists too; nothing is lacking. If, doubting the power of his Word, we begin to look around for an unbroken historical connexion with the apostles, we cannot come closer to the Christ who *has* risen from the dead, shall one day come again, and today speaks his *Word* to us—that Word which is the source of life from creation's morn till the last day. Instead we put more distance between him and us. Christ comes in the Word. The ministry is the instrument the Word uses as its highway to advance and be heard. The power of the ministry is the power of the Word, and not of consecration. The present Lord is he who is at work in the ministry as soon as the Word sounds forth. It is not the case that the Christ of the past cut a channel through the ages and that his power is lessened if any break in historical continuity takes place. The message gives authority to the ministry; consecration, on the contrary, gives no authority to the message. Consecration is but the choice of someone for a *task*—not the setting of him in a channel of power.

¹ Cf. Luther: "The Church is engendered through the Word. Therefore, you must say that the Church is less than the Word. Why, then, do you say that the Church is superior to the Word? It is the same as saying that the child is superior to the mother. But, on the contrary, it is the mother who bears and nourishes the child. So here. Christianity is a child, pure and simple, a mere babe apart from the Word. She is judged and guided by the Word; therefore she cannot judge the Word of God; if she does so, she is a harlot, not a mother" (WA 17(1), 99.26-31; Roth MS).