

Of The Office of Preaching

by Martin Luther (1483-1546)

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OF THE OFFICE OF PREACHING & OF PREACHERS AND HEARERS:

JOHN 10: 1-11: Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers. This parable spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake unto them. Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep. All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have *it* more abundantly. I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

SECTION I. TRUE PREACHERS OF THE WORD MUST BE REGULARLY CALLED.

1. This Gospel treats of the office of the ministry, how it is constituted, what it accomplishes and how it is misused. It is indeed very necessary to know these things, for the office of preaching is second to none in Christendom. St. Paul highly esteemed this office for the reason that through it the Word of God was proclaimed which is effective to the salvation of all who believe it. He says to the Romans (1:16): "I am not

ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." We must now consider this theme, since our Gospel lesson presents and includes it. It will, however, be a stench in the nostrils of the pope!

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But how shall I deal differently with him? The text says: "He that entereth not by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber (murderer)."

2. This verse has been explained as having reference to those who climb, by their presumption, into the best church livings through favor and wealth, recommendations or their own power, not obtaining them by regular appointment and authority. And at present the most pious jurists are punishing people for running to Rome after fees and benefices, or after ecclesiastical preferment and offices. This they call simony. The practice is truly deplorable, for much depends upon being regularly called and appointed. No one should step into the office and preach from his own presumption and without a commission from those having the authority. But under present conditions, if we should wait until we received a commission to preach and to administer the sacraments, we would never perform those offices as long as we live. For the bishops in our day press into their offices by force, and those who have the power of preferment are influenced by friendship and rank. But I pass this by, and will speak of the true office, into which no one forces his way (even though his devotion urge him) without being called by others having the authority.

3. True, we all have authority to preach, yea, we must preach God's name; we are commanded to do so. Peter says in his first Epistle, (2:9-10) "But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: who in time past were no people, but now are the people of God: who had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy." Nevertheless, Paul establishes order in 1 Cor. 14:40 and says: "In whatever you do among yourselves, let everything be done decently and in order." In a family there must be order. If all the heirs strive for lordship, anarchy will reign in the family. If, however, by common consent, one of the number is selected for the heirship, the others withdrawing, harmony

will obtain. Likewise, in the matter of preaching we must make selection that order may be preserved...

(short section omitted here).

SECTION II. PREACHERS OF THE WORD TO PREACH NOTHING BUT THE WORD.

4. So much for the call into the office. But Christ is not speaking of that here; for something more is required, namely, that no rival or supplementary doctrine be introduced, nor another word be taught than Christ has taught. Christ says in Mt. 23:2-4: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat: all things therefore whatsoever they bid you, these do and observe: but do not ye after their works; for they say and do not. Yea, they bind heavy burdens too grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger." Although these of whom Christ here speaks were regularly appointed, yet they were thieves and murderers; for they taught variations from Christ's teaching. Christ reproves them in another place, in Matthew 15:3, where he holds up before them their traditions and tells them how, through their own inventions, they have transgressed the commandments of God, yea, totally abolished them. We have also many prophets who were regularly appointed and still were misled, like Balaam, of whom we read in Num. 22; also Nathan, described in 2 Sam 7:3. Similarly many bishops have erred.

5. Here Christ says: He who would enter by the door must be ready to speak the Word concerning Christ and his word must center in Christ. Let it be called "coming" when one preaches aright; the approaching is spiritual, and through the Word--upon the ears of his hearers, the preacher comes at last into the sheepfold--the heart of believers. Christ says that the shepherd must enter by the door; that is, preach nothing but Christ, for Christ is the door into the sheepfold.

6. But where there are intruders, who make their own door, their own hole to crawl through, their own addition different from that which Christ taught, they are thieves. Of these Paul says to the Romans (16:17-18):

"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and fair speech they beguile the hearts of the innocent." Paul does not speak of opposing or antagonistic doctrines, but of those placed beside the true doctrine; they are additions, making divisions. Paul calls it a rival doctrine, an addition, an occasion of stumbling, an offense and a byway, when one establishes the conscience upon his own goodness or deeds.

7. Now, the Gospel is sensitive, complete and pre-eminent: it must be intolerant of additions and rival teachings. The doctrine of earning entrance into heaven by virtue of fastings, prayers and penance is a branch road, which the Gospel will not tolerate. But our Church authorities endorse these things, hence they are thieves and murderers; for they do violence to our consciences, which is slaying and destroying the sheep. How is this accomplished? If only I am directed into a branch or parallel road, then my soul is turned from God upon that road, where I must perish. Thus this road is the cause of my death. The conscience and heart of man must be founded upon one single Word or they will come to grief. "All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field" (Is 40:6).

8. The doctrines of men, however admirable, fall to the ground, and with them the conscience that has built upon them.

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There is no help nor remedy. But the Word of God is eternal and must endure forever; no devil can overthrow it. The foundation is laid upon which the conscience may be established forever. The words of men must perish and everything that cleaves to them. Those who enter not by the door--that is, those who do not speak the true and pure Word of God, without any addition--do not lay the right foundation; they destroy and torture and slaughter the sheep. Therefore, Christ says further in this Gospel: "But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his Voice."

SECTION III. A TRUE PREACHER SHOULD FIRST USE THE LAW ARIGHT AND THEN PREACH THE GOSPEL.

9. The porter here is the preacher who rightly teaches the Law--shows that the Law exists and must reveal to us our helplessness; that the works of the Law do not help us, and yet they are insistent. He then opens to the shepherd, that is, to Christ the Lord, and lets him alone feed the sheep. For the office of the Law is at an end; it has accomplished its mission of revealing to the heart its sins until it is completely humbled. Then Christ comes and makes a lamb out of the sheep--feeds it with his Gospel and directs it how to regain cheer for the heart so hopelessly troubled and crushed by the Law.

10. The lamb then hears Christ's voice and follows it. It has the choicest of pastures, and knows the voice of the shepherd. But the voice of a stranger it never hears and never follows. Just as soon as one preaches to it about works, it is worried and its heart cannot receive the teaching with joy. It knows very well that nothing is accomplished by means of works; for one may do as much as he will, still he carries a heavy spirit and he thinks he has not done enough, nor done rightly. But when the Gospel comes--the voice of the shepherd--it says: God gave to the world his only Son, that all who believe on him should not perish, but have everlasting

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life. Then is the heart happy; it feeds upon these words and finds them good. The lamb has found its satisfying pasture; it wants none other. Yea, when it is given other pasture, it flees from it and will not feed therein. This pasture always attracts the sheep, and the sheep also find it. God says in the prophecy of Isaiah: "So shall my Word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish all in the things whereto, I sent it" (Is 55:11).

SECTION IV. THE HEARERS HAVE THE RIGHT TO EXAMINE AND JUDGE A SERMON

"And he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. When he hath put forth all his own, he goeth before them and the sheep follow him; for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him; for they know not the voice of strangers."

11. In this text there are two thoughts worthy of note: the liberty of faith, and the power to judge. You know that our soul-murderers have proposed to us that what the councils and the learned doctors decide

and decree, that we should accept, and not judge for ourselves whether it is right or not. They have become so certain of the infallibility of the councils and doctors that they have now established the edict, publicly seen, that if we do not accept what they say, we are put under the ban. Now, let us take a spear in hand and make a hole in their shield; yea, their resolutions shall be a spider's web. And you should, moreover, use upon them the spear which until now they have used upon us, and hold before them its point.

12. Remember well that the sheep have to pass judgment upon that which is placed before them. They should say: We have Christ as our Lord and prefer his Word to the words of any man or to those of the angels of darkness. We want to examine and judge for ourselves whether the pope, the bishops and their followers do right or not. For Christ says here that the sheep judge and know which is the right voice and which is not. Now let them come along. Have they decreed anything? We will examine whether it is right, and according

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to our own judgment interpret that which is a private affair for each individual Christian, knowing that the authority to do this is not human, but divine. Even the real sheep flee from a stranger and hold to the voice of their shepherd.

13. Upon this authority., the Gospel knocks all the councils, all the papistic laws, to the ground, granting to us that we should receive nothing without judging it, that we have besides the power to judge, and that such judgment stands until the present day. The papists have taken from us the sword, so that we have not been able to repel any false doctrine, and, moreover, they have by force introduced false teachings among us. If now we take the sword from them they will be sorry. And we must truly take it, not by force, but by means of the Word, letting go all else that we have, saying: I am God's sheep, whose Word I wish to appropriate to myself. If you will give me that, I will acknowledge you to be a shepherd. If you, however, add another Gospel to this one, and do not give me the pure Gospel, then I will not consider you a shepherd, and will not listen to your voice; for the office of which you boast extends no farther than the Word goes. If we find one to be a shepherd, we should receive him as such: if he is not, we should remove him; for the sheep shall judge the voice of the shepherd. If he does not give us the

right kind of pasture, we should bid farewell to such a shepherd, that is, to the bishop; for a hat of pearls and a staff of silver do not make a shepherd or a bishop, but rather does the office depend upon his care of the sheep and their pasture.

14. Now the papists object to judgment being passed upon any of their works; for this reason they have intruded and taken from us the sword which we might use for such a purpose. Also, they dictate that we must accept, without any right of judgment, whatever they propose. And it has almost come to such a pass that whenever the pope breathes they make an article of faith out of it, and they have proclaimed that the authorities have the right to pass such laws for their subjects as they desire, independent of the judgment of the latter. These conditions mean ruin to the Christians,

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so much so that a hundred thousand swords should be desired for one pope. This they know very well, and they cling hard to their laws. If they would permit unbiased judgment, their laws would be set aside and they would have to preach the pure Word; but such a course would reduce the size of their stomachs and the number of their horses.

15. Therefore, be ye aroused by this passage of Scripture to hew to pieces and thrust through everything that is not in harmony with the Gospel, for it belongs to the sheep to judge, and not to the preachers. You have the authority and power to judge everything that is preached; that and nothing less. If we have not this power, then Christ vainly said to us in Mt. 7:15: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves." We could not beware if we had not the power to judge, but were obliged to accept everything they said and preached.

V. PREACHERS ARE TO FORCE NO ONE TO BELIEVE.

16. The second thought is, no one shall be forced to believe; for the sheep follow him whom they know and flee from strangers. Now, Christ's wish is that none be forced, but that they be permitted to follow from willing hearts and of their own desire; not out of fear, shame or strife. He would let the Word go forth and accomplish all. When their

hearts are taken captive, then they will surely come of themselves. Faith does not go forth from the heart unless it has the Word of God.

17. Our noblemen are now mad and foolish in that they undertake to drive people to believe by means of force and the sword. Christ here wishes the sheep to come of themselves, from their knowledge of his voice. The body may be forced, as the pope, for example, has by his laws coerced people to go to confession and to the Lord's Supper, but the heart cannot be taken captive. Christ wants it to be free. Although he had power to coerce men, he wished to win them through his pleasing, loving preaching. Whoever lays hold of Christ's word follows after him and permits nothing to,

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tear him from it. The noblemen wish to drive the people to believe by means of the sword and fire; that is nonsense. Then let us see to it that we allow the pure Word of God to take its course, and afterward leave them free to follow, whom it has taken captive; yea, they will follow voluntarily.

18. By this I do not wish to abolish the civil sword; for the hand can hold it within its grasp so that it does no one any harm, but it holds it inactive. It must be retained because of wicked villains who have no regard at all for the Word; but the sword cannot force the heart and bring it to faith. In view of its inability, it must keep silent in matters of faith; here one must enter by the door, and preach the Word and make the heart free. Only in this way are men led to believe. These are the two expedients--for the pious and the wicked: the pious are to be drawn by the Word, and the wicked to be driven by the sword to observe order.

VI. THE MARKS OF FALSE PREACHERS.

19. Now, Christ interprets his own words. He says that he is the door to the sheep, but all the others who came before him, that is, those who were not sent by God as the prophets were, but came of themselves, uncommissioned, are thieves and murderers; they steal his honor from God and strangle human souls by their false doctrines. But Christ is the door, and whoever enters by him will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. Here Christ speaks of the Christian liberty, which

means that Christians are now free from the curse and the tyranny of the Law, and may keep the Law or not, according as they see that the love and need of their neighbor requires. This is what Paul did. When he was among the Jews, he kept the Law with the Jews; when among the gentiles, he kept it as they kept it, which he himself says in 1 Cor. 9:19-23:

"For though I was free from all men, I brought myself under bondage to all, that I might gain the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, not being myself under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, not being

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without law to God, but under law to Christ, that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak: I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the gospel's sake, that I may be a joint partaker thereof."

20. That, the thieves and murderers, the false teachers and prophets, never do; they accomplish nothing but to steal, strangle and destroy the sheep. But Christ, the true and faithful shepherd, comes only that the sheep may have life and be fully satisfied. This is enough on today's Gospel for the present. We will conclude and pray God for grace rightly to lay hold of it and understand it.