

The Dignity and Authority of the Christian Pastor

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Our age is one of rapidly changing concepts and values. Variations in the basic disciplines and lifestyles of our society are well-nigh revolutionary, both in their nature and application to our everyday lives. The words of Henry Lyte in his beloved evening hymn, "Change and decay in all around I see," both summarize and almost understate the fast-changing and disintegrating scenario which confronts us in many areas of contemporary life.

And we who labor in the Lord's vineyard are only too aware of how visible Christendom has been caught up in it all. Mainline denominations, which only a few decades ago still subscribed to the basic tenets of the Christian faith, have virtually all abandoned the historic recognition of the Bible as God's inspired and inerrant revelation of His eternal and saving truth. And with it they have cast overboard, one by one and in rapid succession, those divinely-given precepts and statutes once held sacred!

Nor has the office of the holy ministry remained unaffected. A current observer notes:

One of the most striking features of modern society is its rapidly changing concept of the ministry of the gospel. In no other period since the Reformation has the popular appraisal of the work of the minister altered so drastically as in the last half century. In a not too remote day, the parson would have been one of the best educated men in the community...regarded as a prime molder of public opinion...his counsel would have been sought...he would have been regarded as representative of one of the most highly honored professions. But such a day, by and large, is with us no more.¹

A scientific sampling by Lou Harris and Associates purports to show

that clergymen are down in public esteem and confidence to a rating below that of doctors, bankers, scientists, military leaders, educators, corporation heads, psychiatrists, and even local retailers. Their rating of 45 percent, in contrast to 74 percent for doctors, 66 percent for scientists, 62 percent for educators, and 57 percent for psychiatrists, as reported by *Newsweek*, suggest disturbing things about the direction in which Americans are turning for a solution to human problems. The clergy ran a scant 1 percent ahead of congressmen and federal government leaders.²

Were a similar sampling taken today, one could safely assume that it would reflect only a greater deterioration in the public's estimation of the clergy.

Even within the churches today, one finds a wealth of articles and books being published which reflect a deep concern regarding the status and image of the ministry. Titles such as *The Pastoral Calling*, *The Renewal of the Ministry*, *The Preacher's Task and the Stone of Stumbling*, *Stir Up the Gift*, *Preaching the Word with Authority*, *The Preacher's Portrait*, *A Minister's Obstacles*, *Pastoral Authority*, *Clergy in the Cross-Fire*—these and numerous others express a concerted effort to reiterate and redefine the ministry in the light of current problems and crises relating to this office. Perhaps the strongest evidence of trouble in the churches and its

¹ *The New Testament Image of the Ministry*, Purkiser, p.11.

² *Christianity Today*, Vol. XI, No. 8, p. 25.

ministry is to be noted in the ever-declining enrollment in the seminaries of most church bodies. The symptoms suggest that something is amiss and the patient is not well!

As one observes the current dilemma in the churches, it soon becomes apparent that this matter is indeed broad and far-reaching. Our Wisconsin Synod, by God's grace, has been spared the doctrinal deterioration and drift from the sacred Scriptures which also clearly defines for us the pastoral office in Christ's Church on earth. Nevertheless, as pastors and people we cannot overlook the fact that these are troublous times for the visible church and we do not exist in a vacuum. Our people are affected by current attitudes over against the pastoral office, particularly also those who are gained as converts from denominations in which abuses and a lack of Scriptural definition of the Christian ministry exist. Our pastors, likewise, are exposed to contemporary opinions and estimations of their divine calling often with a resultant debilitating effect on their spirit and performance. Particularly those who are moving toward the position of "veterans of the cross" are able to observe that their position and role as pastors of the church generally is not what it once was in terms of acceptance and respect.

We recognize that many contributing factors and causes come into focus here. It might well serve our purposes, in fact, if an entire book were written on this subject. But for our immediate consideration, we would address ourselves primarily to just one facet of the entire spectrum—*the Dignity and Authority of the Christian Pastor*.

I. As Popularly Viewed

Applied to one's profession, Webster defines "dignity" as the *quality of being esteemed* or one's degree of estimation in the eyes of those being served. In the same context, "authority" is *a rightful power to act* in a particular field, due to opinion or esteem, influence of character, mental or moral superiority, or the like. Generally conceived and applied to the ministerial office, dignity and authority are not only interrelated but the rightful power to act (authority) would seem to grow from and become established by the quality of being esteemed (dignity)!

Sadly, such an appraisal of the dignity and authority of the pastoral office is widely endorsed today and involves nothing more in the minds of many functioning therein than does Webster's definition!

A typical example of the direction taken by many writers on this subject is that of Samuel Southard as he addresses "The Problem of Pastoral Authority":³

How can a person who has accepted a transcendent power over his own life enable others to accept and relate the power of God to their own lives? This central question of mission is especially focused in pastors, who represent spiritual authority. They are the transmitters of a sacred tradition, the teachers of the church, the representatives of God.

This is a weighty and often misused authority. It proved to be cumbersome in the post-World War II emphasis upon acceptance, nonjudgment, and ethical relativity. The minister who wished to be person-centered was the first to deny that he had authority.

But Christianity is an authoritative religion. Words like "submit," "obey," "surrender" are common in the Christian tradition. The basic text of faith and order, the Bible, contains direct commands for obedience.

First, the will of God is to be obeyed. So Peter proclaims, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). This will is known in Christ. To know him is to obey him: "You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am" (John 13:13). The Christian disciple is a "captive" of Christ (II Cor. 10:5).

Second, the congregational and ecclesiastical leaders are to be obeyed. Members of the primitive church were told to esteem those who were "over" them (I Thess. 5:12), to obey the doctrine as

³ *Pastoral Authority in Personal Relationships*, Southard, p. 7ff.

taught by apostles (such as Paul; Rom. 16:17,19). To “submit” to rulers of the flock was required (Heb. 13:17).⁴

The authority of the pastor in Southard’s view, then, derives its source from the fact that he has *personally accepted* a “transcendent power.” Subsequently, as a possessor of “spiritual authority,” he is to be a transmitter of “authoritative religion, a system of power which through personal obedience would influence opinion, induce belief, lead to action. Those who submitted would be rewarded; those who rebelled would be punished.”⁵

In all of this, one wonders, “Where is space left for the person and work of the Holy Spirit?”

And then one finds authors on this matter who emphasize what might be described as the “dignity”-side of the pastoral coin. Their view of the pastoral office is again humanized but with a strong regard and concern for personal image.

Emblematic of this school of thought is Stephen Brown who bemoans a pastor’s own misguided estimation of himself:

As I look over some of my own conceptions of the ministry, I see a complex mixture of spiritual advisor, prophetic preacher, skilled administrator, and loved pastor. But if I am honest with myself, I will know that most of the time I am not spiritual enough to advise anyone, that I don’t want to pay the price of a prophet, that many administrative plans often look like Jericho after the trumpets, and that I am not so much a loved pastor as a tolerated cleric. The tasks for which I have been called are so far beyond me and my talents that it is downright frightening. Preacher, psychologist, administrator, prophet, evangelist, marriage counselor, pastor, and teacher are only a few of the tasks I see before me. Every day of my life there will be a feeling of having failed in an important facet of my calling...

Most parishioners believe their minister...has a personal line to God...he can tell them anything they need to know about Him...The trouble with this myth is that too many ministers believe it. They have been held up by others as a substitute for God for so long that they have come to believe they are God or at least a reasonable facsimile of Him...

It is easy for a man to look saintly. It is not really difficult to talk with a stained-glass voice about God, and anyone who has tried knows that one can quote theologians, philosophers, and eminent writers with very little effort. However, it is another matter to tell people that you aren’t the saintly person they thought you to be. It is difficult to be honest about human needs, human problems, and human fears, especially when people think you don’t have any.

A friend of mine who has been married to a minister for almost ten years met a former classmate of hers at a class reunion. During the course of conversation my friend mentioned that she had married a minister. A look of horror crossed the other woman’s face, and in a voice dripping with sympathy she said, “Oh, I’m so sorry—sex is so wonderful.” That says something disturbing about the minister’s image, and the saddest thing about it is ministers often helped to create it. It is no accident that most movies, plays, and novels portray ministers as sexless, anemic half-saints who would be out of place at anything other than a ladies-aid social, dressed in and-thing other than a black suit.

When a minister is confronted by his own misconceived self-image, he can pursue his ministry in any one of three ways.

If he suffers from the illusion that he is what he and others think he is, he can become the “answer man.” He can feel that because he has superior training in the field of religion, it must follow that he has superior answers to all questions...

⁴ Ibid., p. 7-8.

⁵ Southard, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

Sometimes a minister can clearly distinguish the differences between what he would like to be, what others think he is, and what he really is. Then he can either leave the ministry or try to live with the inconsistency...

Now if these were the only alternatives, then I would have to leave the ministry. But there is another way that perhaps most older ministers have known for a long time. I am just learning. A minister can let others in on the secret that he is human. He can look at his own misconceived self-image, and the mistaken image he is given by others, and he can be honest with himself and with them. He can admit his inadequacies and failures...

If I choose this way to make my ministry relevant, I will be freed from the necessity to make others think I am perfect. I can talk about hate because I have hated. I can talk about lust because it is real in my own life. I can talk about pride and selfishness because they are old adversaries. But most of all, I can talk about a God who has come to me in spite of my sins, who has loved me even when He knew me, and who has made me clean even knowing how unclean I am.⁶

Brown certainly offers us some interesting and, at times, humorous reading. Yet one is led to sympathize with those, who, like him, make a pastor's effectiveness in communicating the divine will and plan dependent upon one's own personal and legitimate experiences. For ultimately, then, the efficaciousness of the ministry is conditioned upon the person occupying the office.—He can speak of sin because *he* is a sinner; he can talk about forgiveness because *he* has been forgiven. Such a stance results in a subjectivism which can drive one only further into the morass of self-doubt and negative introspection. The dignity and authority of the pastoral office must rest in the *man* and nothing outside or beyond him!

To gain another perspective of the subject before us as popularly viewed, we would pursue the observations of Jeffrey Hadden in his thought-provoking *The Gathering Storm in the Churches*. He summarizes his book in this way:

In recent years, three crises have been emerging in the Protestant churches; a crisis over its very meaning and purpose for being, a crisis of belief, and a crisis of authority. The three crises are obviously interrelated. Clergy have challenged the traditional role of the church in society because they have reinterpreted the theological basis of their faith and in so doing have come to feel that their faith involves a much more vital commitment to the problems of this world. Laity have challenged the authority of clergy because they do not share their understanding of the meaning and purpose of the church. The shattering of traditional doctrines has weakened the authority of the clergy, for it is no longer certain that they hold the keys to the kingdom.⁷

Hadden develops his case for “the crisis of authority” by offering the following, much of it allegedly based on scientific data gathered by him:

In Protestantism, the struggle over authority appears less dramatic than in the Roman Catholic Church, where authority has been centralized for centuries. But the challenging of authority in Catholicism should not overshadow equally significant power struggles that are occurring in Protestantism. The battleground of this struggle does not conform to traditional boundaries of conflict between major faiths or denominations, but rather is splintering denominations, congregations, and church councils. While the schism cuts in many directions, perhaps the greatest conflict is between clergy and laity... To understand the nature of this conflict requires an examination of the church as an organization and clergymen as its professional leaders. To begin with, religious organizations are *voluntary associations*. By this is meant that individuals choose to participate out of their own volition and not because of some external force

⁶ *Where the Action Is*, Brown, p. 13-19.

⁷ *The Gathering Storm in the Churches*, Hadden, p. 32.

which compels them to membership. The distinction between a voluntary and a non-voluntary association can sometimes be ambiguous. In some nations and at some points in history, the church has been much less a voluntary association than is the case in contemporary American society. To those who view their personal salvation as inextricably bound to participation in the church, it may not seem like a voluntary association. And in some social environments very strong informal pressures are exerted to force conformity to a set of socially prescribed behaviors which include participation in a particular religious group. Nevertheless, there is a strong and growing element of voluntarism in the individual's participation patterns in a religious group. Frequency of attendance, amount of financial support, and the intensity of adherence to the doctrines and goals of a particular religious group are, to a large extent, voluntary and private decisions. If an individual strongly objects to some aspect of the particular religious group to which he belongs, he is, in most cases, free to join another religious group or withdraw from participation in a religious group altogether. Thus, our description of religious institutions as voluntary associations must be understood in a broad, general descriptive sense and not as an absolute principle... If an organization is completely voluntary, its membership must, in a broad sense, accept the organization's goals... If the negative factors involved in participation are perceived to outweigh the positive benefits, membership, or at least commitment, is likely to be curtailed.

Turning from the individual participants to the leaders of a voluntary association, it follows that one of the tasks of the leadership is to see that the organization continues to provide its membership with rewards that are satisfactory to assure their continued participation. If the leadership chooses to redefine the goals and rewards, they must either convince the membership of the efficacy of the new goals and rewards or they must seek to recruit new members who share their definition of the organization. Failure to achieve one or the other of these tasks will result either in the demise of the organization or in their loss of the leadership role.

Leadership in a voluntary association, thus, involves a greater element of precariousness than in non-voluntary organizations. Voluntary associations are less likely to give their leaders a mandate to develop their own goals for the organization. The leader must operate within the boundaries of his prescribed role as leader. To deviate beyond the role prescriptions of his office is to invite conflict with the membership.

At this point we need to introduce some additional concepts to understand the precarious nature of the leader's role in a voluntary association. The first concept is *power*; by which we mean the ability of an individual or a coalition of individuals to exercise their will in a group with respect to some goal or activity. *Authority*, on the other hand, is the legitimate right to exercise power... Sociologist Max Weber has described three ways by which a leader may gain authority. The first of these is *tradition*. Over a period of time certain rights and powers come to be associated with an office, i.e., leadership position. Therefore, the incumbent of an office assumes authority because traditionally the holder of that office has assumed authority with respect to specific tasks. A second type of authority described by Weber is *rational-legal* and accrues to a specific office because the group has established laws or rules which specify that the office legally embraces certain specific authority. A third type of authority is called *charismatic* and accrues to an individual leader because he possesses traits which inspire confidence and a willingness on the part of the members of the group to follow his directives, independent of what tradition and law may define as the means of authority.

Paul Harrison... described a fourth type of authority, which he calls *rational-pragmatic*. This is power that is not legitimately authorized, but rather is "power grasped" because the holder of an office finds it expedient to exercise power in a vacuum where power has not legally been authorized. These types of authority, to be sure, are only ideal-type constructs, and a careful

scrutiny of the types reveals that they are not necessarily independent types. Nevertheless, they are useful for the present discussion...

In the Protestant churches the leadership is predominantly made up of clergymen. While Protestantism presumably differs from Catholicism in its adherence to the theological doctrine of the priesthood of every believer, in reality the major bulk of the planning, programming, and decision-making in Protestantism has been entrusted to a professional leadership group—the clergy...

In the past, laity have not objected seriously to the authority structure in their churches. To the extent that they have even been aware of the fact that the clergy were calling most of the shots, they have not been particularly disturbed. But when the rank and file of a voluntary association object to the direction in which the leadership is moving the organization, they begin to exercise their own authority. In Protestantism today, laity, who have entrusted authority to professional leaders, have come to have grave doubts about how the authority has been used, and are beginning to assert their own influence.

An examination of the ways in which this is happening points up the importance of our comments about the church as a voluntary association. Because the church is a voluntary association, laity have very significant authority vis-a-vis their ability to withhold or control the nature of their support. The collective annual budgets of the Protestant churches in America total several hundred million dollars. While some of these operating expenses come from foundations, endowments, and investments, by far the greatest source of operating revenues comes from the ongoing voluntary contributions of the membership. Without these voluntary contributions, most churches would close their doors in a matter of weeks. But this is not the only source of power that the laity hold. In many denominations they have the immediate authority to hire and fire a minister, and in those denominations where this task is removed from the local congregation, they can still exercise influence by threatening to withhold their financial contributions. And finally, the layman can exercise influence by threatening to withdraw membership from the organization. One layman whose financial contribution to the church is relatively small may have relatively little power if he chooses to oppose his local pastor. But several members or a single member whose contribution constitutes a significant proportion of the congregation's budget must be contended with...

Because much of the conflict over authority is decentralized, it is difficult to determine just how widespread the episodes have been. My own clipping of newspapers and interviews with hundreds of clergy over the past three years, however, would suggest that the actual extent of confrontations is much broader than is generally believed. Furthermore, I see little evidence that the basis for continued conflict will be eliminated soon. If anything, the full impact of the latent conflict has not yet been felt.⁸

In the light of the foregoing observations and opinions as they relate to the dignity and authority of the pastoral office as popularly viewed, one is led to ask with Saint Paul, "What then shall we say to these things?" (Rom. 8:31). Is there something to be learned? Can we profit thereby? Perhaps, but if for no other reason than to see reflected in it all some ways in which we too might follow, or at least be tempted to follow, in the false conceptions of the pastoral office and role as conceived by others.

There is a legitimate authority inherent in the pastoral office. But am I exercising it properly when I insist that my people recognize and submit to it by virtue of the "spiritual authority" that I possess as an occupant of that office? Or how often am I not inclined to regard myself as the participant in a "system of power" conferred upon me as a parish pastor and member of a church body and that, by virtue of this position, I carry with me an authority which ought to be recognized in molding the opinions, beliefs, and actions of my

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26-32.

people? Such an attitude surfaces all too often, for example, when one hears that such and such is true and this or that response should be forthcoming because “it is what the Wisconsin Synod teaches!”—Certainly as a pastor and member of that synod, I am entitled to the obedience inherent therein! Or when the dignity of the pastoral office is considered, how comforting and self-satisfying to imagine that my members estimation of *me* is the thing to be grasped and that the effectiveness of my ministry is conditioned on how they perceive of my vast abilities and wealth of experience!

Or, again, I can rationalize and reduce the whole matter of my functioning in the pastoral office to an interaction between myself and my people. If ineffective, *they*, of course, are the culprits! When there are problems in the church, it will be because “the laymen are just not intelligent enough to accept my solutions.” When the church can’t meet expenses, it’s because “the laymen aren’t dedicated enough to meet their pledges.” When the attendance is down and membership is dwindling, it’s because “the laymen are not witnessing.” When people begin to leave the church, it’s because “they won’t accept the truth.” And when the minister is criticized, it will be because “the laymen can’t appreciate greatness when it stares them in the face.” Contrariwise, if these negative conditions do not exist, it’s because “*I* have inspired confidence in my people” with a resultant and understandable willingness on their part to follow *my* directives!

Throughout our observations thus far, it becomes obvious that the dignity and authority of the Christian pastor as popularly viewed is arrived at almost entirely from a man-centered orientation. One senses in most of the material addressed to this issue a real spiritual rarefaction. While there are references to God and even to the minister as a “representative” of God in the various “tasks” of his office (preacher, teacher, evangelist, counselor, etc.), one is hard-pressed to discover much that offers a God-given definition of the pastoral office with a subsequent God-centered conception of its dignity and authority. We shall then address ourselves to these attributes of the pastoral office as defined and conferred by the Lord of the Church.

II. As Divinely Given

Very helpful to our consideration is the fine outline on the Office of the Ministry as drawn up by C. F. W. Walther in his “Theses on the Ministry”⁹ which we have included as an addendum to this presentation. To distinguish between the priesthood of all believers and that particular teaching office which exists in the Church, Walther states in Thesis I: “The holy ministry, or the pastoral office, is an office distinct from the priestly office, which belongs to all believers.” These two offices are separate and are not to be confused, for Paul asks: “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? *Are all teachers?*” (I Cor. 12:29). “And how shall they *preach* unless they are sent?” (Rom. 10:15).

Furthermore, then, Thesis II: “The ministry, or the pastoral office, is not a human ordinance, but an office established by God Himself.” Already in the Old Testament it was prophesied that God would give to the Church of the New Covenant shepherds and teachers: “The Lord gave the word; great was the company of those who proclaimed it” (Ps. 68:11). “And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jer. 3:15). “Be glad then, you children of Zion, And rejoice in the Lord your God; For He has given you [teachers of righteousness]¹⁰” (Joel 2:23). Moreover, the divine institution of the ministry in the New Testament appears “from the call of the holy apostles to the ministry of teaching by the Son of God,”¹¹ in Matthew 10; 28:18-20; Luke 9:1-10; Mark 16:15; John 20:21-23; 21:15-17; and of the seventy disciples as recorded in Luke 10:1-22. And finally, the divine origin of the ministry of the Gospel in the Church appears from all those passages in which also “those who have been mediately called are represented as having been called by God.”¹² Noteworthy is the fact that all three persons of the Trinity are named as Creators of the Office: the Father, in I Corinthians—“And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers...” (12:28); the Son, in Ephesians—“And [Christ] Himself gave...some pastors and

⁹ Walther and the Church, p. 71-86.

¹⁰ This clause in Luther’s translation is omitted in some English translations.

¹¹ Walther and the Church, p. 72.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 72.

teachers” (4:11); the Holy Ghost, in the Acts—“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers...” (20:28).

Apart from the divine institution of this office, wherein does its authority reside? Its authority rests in the commission of Christ *to use the means of grace*. Says Walther, Thesis V: “The ministry of preaching has the authority to preach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments and the authority of a spiritual tribunal.” Whether Christ’s command to disciple the nations by baptizing and teaching (Matt. 28:19-20), or His directive to remit and retain sins (John 20:21,23), or His charge to feed His lambs and sheep (John 21:15-16)—in any and all of these pastoral activities, the final power and authority rests in the Word of God! *The Word alone* accomplishes what God pleases and prospers in the spiritual work which He has sent it to do (Is. 55:11). Accordingly, the holy apostle writes: “Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” (I Cor. 4:1).

And how is the authority of this pastoral office given? “The ministry of preaching is conferred by God through the congregation, as the holder of all church power, or of the keys, and by its call, as prescribed by God” (Thesis VI). Accordingly we read that even the Apostle Matthias was not elected to his exalted office by the eleven apostles but by the entire gathering of the assembled believers, about a hundred and twenty of whom were present (Acts 1:15-26).

It follows, then, that since this office was created by the will and ordinance of God, the Church is not only obligated to establish and maintain it, but it is also necessary that all those being served by this office render it obedience. This is enjoined in Hebrews 13:17: “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as these who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief.” In this same vein, Walther, in effect, touches upon the dignity of the office in Thesis IX: “*Reverence and unconditional obedience is due to the ministry of preaching when the preacher is ministering the Word of God.*” Note that the dignity of the office is always conditioned on the authority of the Word! Walther elaborates:

When a preacher is ministering God’s Word in his congregation, whether he be teaching or admonishing, reproofing or comforting, publicly or privately, the congregation hears from his mouth Jesus Christ Himself and owes him unconditional obedience as to a person by whom God wants to make known His will to them and guide them to eternal life. The more faithfully the preacher discharges his office, the greater must be the reverence of which the congregation deems him worthy. Nor has the congregation any right to take away his office from such a faithful servant of Jesus Christ; if it does this; the congregation therewith thrusts aside Jesus Christ Himself, in whose name their preacher ruled over them. A congregation can remove an incumbent from office only when it is evident from God’s Word that God Himself has removed him as a wolf or a hireling (Luke 10:16; Heb. 13:17; I Thess. 5:12-13; I Tim. 5:17-19; Matt. 10:12-15).¹³

To which Walther adds antithetically: “However, the preacher may not dominate over the Church; he has, accordingly, no right to make new laws, to arrange indifferent matters and ceremonies arbitrarily” (Thesis IX). This he elaborates:

Thus speaks the Lord to his disciples: “Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles *exercise dominion* over them, and they that are great *exercise authority* upon them. But *it shall not be so among you,*” Matt. 21:25,26. “Be not ye called Rabbi; for one is your Master, even Christ; *and all ye are brethren,*” Matt. 23:8. Again, the Lord testifies before Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight,” John 18:36. We see from this that the Church of Jesus Christ is not a dominion of such as command and such as obey, but it is one great, holy brotherhood in which no one can dominate and exercise force.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 80-81.

Now, this necessary equality among Christians is not abolished by the obedience which they render to the preachers when these confront them with the Word of Jesus Christ; for in this case, in obeying the preachers, they do not obey men but Christ Himself. Just as certainly, however, this equality of believers would be abolished and the Church would be changed into a secular state if a preacher would demand obedience also when he presents to the Christians, not the Word of Christ, who is his and all Christians' Lord and Head, but something which by virtue of his own understanding and experience he considers good and appropriate. *Hence the moment there is a discussion in the Church about matters indifferent*, that is, such as are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word, *the preacher may never demand unconditional obedience for something* which appears best just to him. In such a case it is rather the business of the entire *congregation*, of the preacher *together with* the hearers, to decide the question whether what has been proposed should be accepted or rejected. It is, however, due the preacher, by reason of his office of teacher, overseer, and watchman, to guide the deliberations that have to be instituted, to instruct the congregation regarding the matter, to see to it that in settling indifferent matters and arranging order and ceremonies of the church nothing is done in a trifling manner and nothing harmful is adopted.

For this reason the holy apostles write: "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder...: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint but willingly; nor for filthy lucre but of a ready mind; *neither as being lords over God's heritage* but being examples to the flock," I Pet. 5:1-3.

"I *speak not by commandment* but by occasion of the forwardness of others and to prove the sincerity of your love," 2 Cor. 8:8. Paul had asked the Corinthians previously for a contribution to the poor.

"This I speak for your own profit; *not that I may cast a snare upon you*, but for that which is comely and that ye may attend upon the Lord without distraction," I Cor. 7:35. Paul had previously recommended to the Corinthians the celibate life during the time of persecution. When the holy apostles, notwithstanding these statements, among other things write this: "The rest will I set in order when I come," I Cor. 11:34, it is evident from the foregoing that they made arrangements in regard to indifferent matters not by way of commands but by offering their advice and with the consent of the entire congregation.¹⁴

Coupled with obedience should be honor and esteem. These, too, are strongly recommended to the Christian congregations. Paul writes to Timothy: "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine" (I Tim. 5:17). And Jesus tells the Seventy as He sends them out: "He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me" (Luke 10:16). And Paul, lest some deny him honor because he lacked prestige as a person, asked for it indirectly in declaring to the Romans: "Inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry" (Rom. 11:13). Needless to say, however, a pastor must prove himself worthy of the honor granted to his office. Finally, bearing in mind Walther's description of the Church of Jesus Christ as one great, holy brotherhood, we would note:

Where there is honor, there is also love. This is the golden band that ties both pastor and people into a social unit that reflects the love of God which brought them into being. Of it Paul reminds the Thessalonians in these words: "And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (I Thess. 5:12-13). An outstanding example of love for their pastor is the congregation in Galatia. So genuine and fervent was that love that the Christians there were not irritated at the physical infirmities with which Paul was afflicted, but accepted him as a

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81-83.

messenger from God. And so deeply is Paul moved by their forbearance that he must express his appreciation of it in these words: “Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the Gospel unto you at the first. And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus” (Gal. 4:13-14).¹⁵

In summary, we dare never forget that the dignity and authority of the Christian pastor are God-given! They do not exist by virtue of the office-holder; rather because of *the authority of the Word* which alone transmits divine power through the proclamation of it, and because of *the dignity which results* when believers esteem those who preach and teach the Word. Apart from the Holy Spirit’s effective working through the Word, neither the Office of the Ministry nor the dignity and authority attached to it would have any actual or real being.

Let us in our ministries, then, heed the advice of Paul: “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: *Preach the Word!* Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (II Tim. 4:1-2). That done, the Lord will give dignity and authority to the ministry He instituted and still maintains. For He has summarized it all in one sentence: “*How beautiful are the feet [dignity] of those who preach the gospel of peace [authority]!*” (Rom. 10:15).

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¹⁵ *Abiding Word*, Vol. II, p. 485-486.

Addendum

Walther's Theses on the Ministry

- THESIS I The holy ministry, or the pastoral office, is an office distinct from the priestly office, which belongs to all believers.
- THESIS II The ministry, or the pastoral office, is not a human ordinance, but an office established by God Himself.
- THESIS III The ministry of preaching is not an arbitrary office, but its character is such that the Church has been commanded to establish it and is ordinarily bound to it till the end of days.
- THESIS IV The ministry of preaching is not a peculiar order, set up over and against the common estate of Christians, and holier than the latter, like the priesthood of the Levites, but is an office of service.
- THESIS V The ministry of preaching has the authority to preach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments and the authority of a spiritual tribunal.
- THESIS VI The ministry of preaching is conferred by God through the congregation, as holder of all church power, or of the keys, and by its call, as prescribed by God. The ordination of these called, with the laying on of hands, is not by divine institution but is an apostolic church ordinance and merely a public, solemn confirmation of the call.
- THESIS VII The holy ministry is the authority conferred by God through the congregation, as holder of the priesthood and of all church power, to administer in public office the common rights of the spiritual priesthood in behalf of all.
- THESIS VIII The ministry is the highest office in the Church, from which, as its stem, all other offices of the Church issue.
- THESIS IX Reverence and unconditional obedience is due to the ministry of preaching when the preacher is ministering the Word of God. However, the preacher may not dominate over the Church; he has, accordingly, no right to make new laws, to arrange indifferent matters and ceremonies arbitrarily, and to impose and execute excommunication ALONE, without a previous verdict of the entire congregation.
- THESIS X According to divine right the function of passing judgment on doctrine belongs indeed to the ministry of preaching. However, also the laymen have this right, and for this reason they also have a seat and vote with the preachers in church courts and councils.