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## Luther's Teaching of the Christian Priesthood

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There is no greater sin for a Christian, no greater danger to one's state of grace, than to think like a Pharisee - - considering myself pious while looking down on others. Conceit is obnoxious to God. He resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Such presumption is the greatest danger facing us Lutherans - - imagining we're better than other churches because we possess sound doctrine. Now to be sure, when compared to doctrine that is corrupt, sound doctrine is indeed a priceless treasure. We have the gospel in apostolic purity and with the same power that enabled Paul to bring the world to the feet of the Lord. But does this awesome fact give us the right to say with the Pharisee, "God, we thank you that we are not like the Methodists, the Baptists, or those poor Roman Catholics?" Or when we contemplate the fact that God in amazing grace has given us - - the worst of sinners - - that one thing which makes us holy, which rescues us from Satan and saves us, do we admit from our hearts that, yes, we not only possess this treasure, but that *we're totally unworthy of it*, and unhappily, *have failed to use it* with appropriate thankfulness? Our celebration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation will be a curse for our church if it does not, first of all, drive us to our knees.

For what purpose has God placed his pure gospel on earth? He gave it so that the power of sin would be broken, so that everything that is exalted would be humbled before God, so that every knee would bow and all flesh worship Jesus Christ, who alone is exalted. God gave us his gospel so that from it we would learn to despair of our own abilities and to cling in faith to the grace he offers us there. The gospel is also to serve our sanctification, strengthening us each day more and more to leave behind our bondage to sin and to grow to maturity in Christ. To possess the pure word and at the same time to continue to serve our sinful nature is to carry on oneself the mark of God's judgment (Ps 50:16 f). Unless the word which Luther preached

makes us holy and pious, that is, penitent, believing, chaste, humble, loving, truthful and generous, that “pure doctrine” will one day condemn us.

One thing ought to be noted in particular. In no church body is there as much argument and strife as among Lutherans. Woe to him who hopes to be saved through the gospel of love, yet who withholds that love! Woe also to persons who claim that this gospel is their greatest treasure, but who then offer only the leftovers of their income for the gospel, instead of being ready, if necessary, to offer up everything they have for the sake of the gospel - - spouse and child, possessions, even blood. To be a Lutheran in the fullest sense of the term is the greatest honor there is. But to brag about having pure doctrine and then to fail to be the kind of person sound doctrine produces is to be a hypocrite. What have we received from Luther? The question can be answered in various ways. We have the teaching

- about eternal life
- about Christ
- about grace
- and the Means of Grace
- about being declared “Not Guilty!” by God
- and about faith

I would like to present the treasure of the Reformation. This is the concept which the greatest man of the Lutheran church in this country, Dr. Walther, introduced in order to identify the essence of Lutheranism: the teaching of *the priesthood of all believers*.

After the apostles, Luther was the first to teach correctly the truth about the priesthood of all believers. Augustine could not present this teaching correctly. Although his understanding of the doctrine of *grace* was reasonably correct, his false teaching concerning *the church* obscured his understanding of the universal priesthood. Already in some of his earliest writing and throughout all of his later writings, however, Luther taught this facet of the gospel clearly and emphatically. From Luther, Walther drew his understanding of this doctrine and set it down in his writings, particularly *Of Church and Ministry* and *The True Form ...*. This teaching is absolutely priceless, for it teaches us what God has given his church as its inner glory and as the basis for its holy character. It is remarkable that this teaching has never really been popular among us, that it has never really been put into practice, but has, for the most part, remained merely a matter of theory. The priesthood of every believer has once again been largely forgotten. In our congregational life - - except for the voting assembly - - there is hardly a trace of its being put into practice.

It simply has to be a matter of concern to us to understand this teaching in all of its significance. Luther put this down in writing in his *The Freedom of the Christian*. Here is what he said:

“Through the work of our Lord Jesus Christ every sinner, as soon as he comes to faith, is so completely reconciled to God and united with God that for him there is no longer any law. He

is permitted to enter the very presence of God and may associate with God as his child and as a brother of Jesus Christ. No human being can come between him and God. "

Here is the great difference between Roman and Lutheran teaching. Luther placed the believer in direct contact with God - - exactly where Christ, through his work, his Spirit, and his word have placed him. Heaven is open for the Christian! Already on earth the Christian lives in heaven! The pope, however, has injected himself between the Christian and God, between the Christian and Christ. The Lord says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Between Christ and the Christian, the papacy has inserted its priest who must first mediate between the two, in essence setting up an additional savior. By so doing it has made the way to Christ so narrow that a poor sinner can never in his whole life be sure that he is saved.

Now to the matter before us. Thesis 1:

**In contrast to the false spiritual priesthood of the papacy,  
Luther taught from the Scripture that simply being a Christian makes one a true priest.**

What does the pope teach about the priesthood? To begin with, he divides Christendom into two groups: the laity and the priesthood. Under the papacy, Christ has given all the treasures he won not to lay Christians in general, but first of all only to the inner circle of priests, from whose hand the laity may then receive what they need. At Christ's time this privileged group was represented by the twelve apostles. It was these men whom Christ took into special fellowship with himself. To them he gave a correct understanding of his teaching, equipped them to teach it properly and to administer all his gifts for the laity. He gave them the authority to govern the laity, and in particular the authority to celebrate the sacraments, especially the sacrifice of the Mass. To them Christ said, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you," thereby making them his representatives on earth and installing them into his threefold office - - of prophet, priest and king. Roman Catholic theology divides the priest's threefold office into

- prophet: the authority of the teaching office
- priest: the authority of the ordained priesthood
- king: the authority of the judicial system.

The first of these, the *teaching office*, is defined in this way: Christ, through whom God has revealed his truth to us, has all authority. He has given his apostles, his representatives in the priesthood, the command and the authority to instruct the entire world. Christ's command to teach, and the divine authority that goes with that command, therefore applies to the priests. It was to them, to them as his special priests, that Christ said, "Go into all the world and preach." When Christ said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Truth will guide you into all truth, and will guard you against error," he was promising his priests infallibility in their teaching office. Christ continues to keep this promise to those who hold this teaching office - - and those are the priests. The common people, the laity, are therefore obligated to acknowledge this

teaching office as ordained by God, and to receive the saving truth only from the mouth of the priest.

The authority of *the ordained priesthood* is the authority to administer the sacraments, in particular the sacrament of the Eucharist, and in conjunction with this, to continually offer God the so-called Sacrifice of the Mass on behalf of the laity. During the mass the priest, through his spoken word and divine power, changes the elements of bread and wine into the very body and blood of Christ. Through prayer and by elevating these consecrated elements, he then offers them to God as an unbloody repetition of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice for sin on Calvary. The teaching of the sacrifice of the mass is the very essence of the papacy. Luther correctly observed that if the mass were to fall, the entire papacy would fall with it. He declared the sacrifice of the mass to be the most horrible abomination; he lamented the fact that having been a Roman priest himself, he was guilty of it.

The authority of the *judicial system* is the ruling power of the church. It consists *first* of the church's *legislative* authority. Priests can make laws for the laity above and beyond God's moral law, and prescribe for them how they are to live and act. What the priest prescribes must be viewed as commanded by God. Whoever refuses to acknowledge one of these "laws of the church," refuses to acknowledge God, and without repentance cannot be saved.

The *second* component of this legal system is the church's *judicial* authority – the authority, given to every priest, to investigate and evaluate the moral life of the Christian, and according to his findings, to condemn him or to absolve him.

This is what takes place in auricular confession. In the confessional booth the confessing Christian must name to the priest all the sins s/he can remember. The priest will seek to determine whether the sinner is truly repentant and wishes to amend sinful ways - - whereupon the priest will announce his verdict: "Your sin is forgiven," or as the case may be, "Your sin is not forgiven" (retained).

The *third* component of this legal system is the authority *to enforce*. This is essentially the authority to prescribe to the sinner a particular punishment (*penance*) which he must perform to atone for his sins and make satisfaction for the sin he has committed. It was from this authority, over a period of time, that the notorious *indulgences* developed. According to specific regulations, the priest may exclude from heaven, as well as from the congregation, a person whom he deems impenitent. If the circumstances of a particular sin involve not only an individual Christian but an entire congregation or even of an entire district, the authority to adjudicate may be reserved for the bishop, or under certain condition, even for the pope.

One thing must not be overlooked. As was the case with the apostles, all priests of the Roman church constitute a single unit. The individual priest who leaves the priesthood loses his standing. All authority of a priest is contingent on the fact that he has one head, the pope, just as Christ made Peter the chief of the apostles, when he said: "You are Peter ... I will give you

the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:18 f). “Take care of my sheep” (Jn 21:16). According to Roman teaching, with these words Christ appointed Peter to oversee the other apostles and to supervise the entire church. Whoever severed himself from Peter lost not only his apostleship but any authority that went with it. Only Peter had the threefold authority to *teach* and to offer *sacrifice* and to maintain *discipline* in the church. Peter held this authority for the entire church, whereas the authority of the other apostles was limited to a smaller segment of the church.

Since this apostolic authority is to function until Judgment Day, the Lord gave Peter and the other apostles the assignment and the authority to transmit their office to successors. He instructed them to do everything necessary and beneficial to the welfare of the church. He promised that he himself would be with them, that he would guide them into all truth, and that he would protect them against all danger. The authority to confer their office upon a successor is carried out through *ordination*. This is a holy sacrament with divine power, which gives the ordained priest an indelible spiritual character, and equips him with God’s own authority. Through such ordination pope and bishop are to place men who represent them in the various areas and congregations. That is the typical Roman parish priest, spiritual leader of the local congregation.

As examples of how the apostolic office was transferred to successors, Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete are cited. This is the Roman teaching of *apostolic succession*. Only he has a genuine priesthood who can prove that he was ordained by a bishop who can document that he himself was ordained by someone in the succession going back to the apostles. Being installed into one’s pastoral office by the choice and call of a group of Christians, as is done among us and other Protestant church bodies, counts for nothing in the Roman church. Lay Christians have neither the assignment nor the authority to call and install servants of the church.

The “laity” are those members of the church who initially have received nothing from Christ, but are to receive from the ordained priest everything they need for their souls’ eternal welfare. Just as the priest has been assigned by God directly to teach the people, to govern them and to offer sacrifice on their behalf, so God has assigned the laity to submit to the teaching and rule of the priest, to allow him to offer sacrifice for them, to accept only from the priest’s hand all the graces and gifts of God. Rome teaches that all grace lies in the appointed Means of Grace. Only in the hand and in the mouth of the ordained priest, however, are the Means of Grace effective. Woe to that lay-member who would presume to take for himself the task of administering the Means of Grace! He would be committing a sacrilege, a violation of something holy. Only in cases of emergency (for example, an emergency baptism) does the church of Rome and its pope grant the laity a privilege reserved for the priesthood. Under the papacy, therefore, the lay Christian is, in matters pertaining to his soul’s salvation, completely under the control of the priesthood.

The pages of history document the tyranny to which Rome's teaching of the priesthood of officialdom had led at Luther's time. The impetus for the Reformation occurred when the Dominican monk Tetzel, in the name of the pope and the archbishop of Mainz, actually sold forgiveness of sins for money. This so-called indulgence had initially promised release from those church-ordained penalties which the priest had laid on the confessing penitent as satisfaction for his sins. Early on, these penances included things like pilgrimages, prayers, and mortification of the body. Later on, these works of penance instead became financial penalties. And since, over a period of time, popes and archbishops always needed more money, they made of the indulgence exclusively a remission of sin's guilt and its penalty, as well as the deliverance of that soul from purgatory for whom the indulgence had been purchased. This abuse, as well as all other false teaching and practice in the Roman church, stem from its basic error regarding the special priesthood of church officials, according to which the ordained priest has all authority in the church, while the laity has none.

In sharpest contrast, Luther taught that originally there were not two, but only one class of people in the church, and that one class consists of believers, Christians. Through the mercy of God, by virtue of being believers, all Christians are priests of God, who stand in his presence. Other than these priests, there are no true priests in the church. The priesthood which Roman "priests" claim for themselves as a special office, instituted by God himself, which puts them above other Christians, is a lie and a deception - - not from God, but from Satan, who invented it and has propagated it.

Luther attacked the teaching of the Roman priesthood already in his three great writings of 1520: *the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *To the Christian Nobility*, and *The Freedom of the Christian*. In the first he speaks of a triple wall which the pope had built around himself, keeping people at an appropriate distance. This wall is the Roman priesthood. Luther wrote: "Pope, bishops, priests, and monks were designated *the spiritual order*, while nobles, knights, workers, and farmers constituted *the earthly order* - - an artificial and hypocritical distinction. Let no one be intimidated by this, because all Christians are truly members of the spiritual order. There is no distinction among them except for their specific function, as St. Paul makes clear in 1 Co 12:12. We all form one body, although each has his own function in order to serve the others. This means that we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and we're all Christians of equal rank (Ep 4:5). Only baptism, gospel, and faith can make someone a spiritual, Christian person."

Again Luther writes, "O you popes, who have merited this sacrament of ordination (of priests!) O you princes, not of the Christian churches, but of the schools of Satan, indeed schools of darkness ... What a disgrace for the church of God, to have to put up with the abomination of this priesthood! Where are the bishops or priests who understand the gospel - - to say nothing about preaching it? Why do they boast about being priests? Why do they want people to look upon them as holier, better, more powerful than other Christian who are merely the laity? An unschooled person can read the lectionary for the day ..."

“A pope or a bishop can pour oil on a man, consecrate him, ordain him, dress him in clothing different from what laymen wear, but that can only create a puppet; it will never make anybody a Christian or a spiritual person. It is through baptism that we have all been consecrated as priests. St. Peter calls us a royal priesthood, priestly royalty (1 Pe 2:9). “With your blood you purchased men for God .... and made them to be kings and priests” (Re 5:10). If there were no ordination for us higher and better than that offered by the pope or bishop, no one could ever become a priest, celebrate the sacrament, or preach forgiveness! ... Whoever wants to be a Christian should remember and reflect on this: we are all priests. We all have the same right to preach the word of God and to administer the sacraments, except that no one may take it upon himself to do so publicly, without the approval of the congregation or at the request of his superiors ...”

In *The Freedom of the Christian* Luther addresses the question, “How did we Christians become priests?” He answers:

“The one true priest of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, has been anointed by God to be our prophet, high priest and king. Christ, who by right of the firstborn has all honor and worthiness, shares this with his Christians, so that through faith they must all be kings and priests with him, as St. Peter says: ‘You are a priestly royalty and a royal priesthood.’

... Being a priest is much more than being a king. Being a priest enables one to stand in the presence of God and to pray for another person. To stand before the eyes of God and to pray for another is a privilege that belongs to no one except to the priests ... who can comprehend the honor and dignity that goes with being a Christian? Through his *royal* position he has authority over every-thing; through his *priesthood* he has power over God.

Someone may ask: ‘If they are all priests, then what difference is there between priests and laity in Christendom?’ Answer: an injustice is done to the word priest or pastor when these titles are taken away from common Christians and reserved only for a small group whom one calls *the spiritual order*. The Holy Scripture makes no other distinction except to call those who have been trained and set apart for special service ‘servants, stewards, overseers who are to preach Christ, faith, and Christian freedom to others.’ For although we are all priests, we cannot all serve as overseers or preach. St. Paul says, ‘Men ought to regard us as no more than servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God’ (1 Co 4:1). We want people to consider us no more than servants of Christ and stewards of the gospel. But now being God’s overseer has developed into an external, worldly, awesome position of privilege and authority - - so much so that a real world power can’t begin to compare with it, and as though the laity were something else than Christian people. This mistaken view has robbed us of the correct understanding of grace, of Christian freedom, faith, and of everything we have received from Christ - - even Christ himself. In his place we’ve been given man-made regulation governing human conduct. We have become slaves, the most inept people on earth.”

This last statement of Luther emphasizes a very important truth. From Rome's doctrine that Christ established two kinds of people in the church (priesthood and laity), all of the error in the Roman church has developed. The history of the church has shown that deterioration in the teaching of justification has gone hand in hand with the false teaching of the special office of the priest. Where this false teaching is fostered, even when this is done unobtrusively, the true teaching of grace and of the freedom of the Christian has already been lost.

These are just a few examples of what Luther taught about the false priesthood of the Roman church, and the genuine priesthood of the true church. Luther emphasized this same teaching in many of his later writings, down to his last major work (1545) on the subject of the papacy: *The Papacy at Rome, Instituted by the Devil*, which treats the subject at considerable length.

In his treatise *How to Choose and Ordain Servants of the Church* (1523), Luther described the true essence of the priesthood and enumerated its duties. "These are the priestly duties: teaching, proclaiming the word of God, baptizing, administering the Lord's Supper, forgiving and retaining sin, praying for others, offering sacrifices and evaluating doctrine. These are noble and exalted duties, worthy of royalty. The foremost duty, however, on which all the others depend, is teaching the word of God. This is a privilege given to all Christians, as Isaiah prophesied: "All your sons will be taught by the LORD" (Is 54:13). St. Peter also emphasizes that the ministry of preaching God's word belongs to *all* Christians. "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pe 2:9). I ask you: Who are those priests who have been called out of darkness into the wonderful light? Are they only anointed men with a tonsure and wearing robes - - in other words, Roman priests? Isn't St. Peter referring to *all* Christians? Peter assigns them not only the authority, but also the command to declare the praises of God - - in other words, to preach the word of God.

"Let those people step forward now who have invented a *twofold* priesthood - - one *spiritual* and common to all, the other special and *external* - - and who allege that St. Peter is here referring to a special spiritual priesthood. What is the ministry of their special, external priesthood but to declare the praises of God? St. Peter, however, gave this command to the universal spiritual priesthood. These blasphemers do indeed have a different external priesthood, but with it they proclaim, not the praises of God, but of the pope and of their own ungodliness. It is clear that in the ministry of the word there is no other proclamation than declaring the praises of God, and that ministry belongs to all Christians. Similarly, there is no other priesthood than the spiritual priesthood, which is common to all Christians and which St. Peter here describes."

Luther emphasized that administering all spiritual functions properly belongs to all spiritual priests: baptizing, administering the Lord's Supper, using the Keys to remit and retain sin, offering sacrifices, praying for others, and evaluating doctrine. Worthy of special mention is one point that Luther emphasized in his discussion of the Ministry of the Keys: "Here I am not bothered by the spouting of actors masquerading as theologians, who claim that St. Peter

maintains a distinction between the *power* of the Keys and the *authority to use* the Keys. The contrived distinction is a fraud which alleges that the congregation of Christians has the blessed power of the Keys, but that the authority to use them belongs only to the bishops. That argumentation is frivolous and thoughtless, and cannot stand. Christ has given to every Christian not only the *power* of the Keys, but also the *authority to use* them when he says: 'Let him be to you as a heathen,' (Mt 18:17). Whom did Christ address with the words 'to you' - - the pope? He was speaking to every Christian personally. And when he said, 'Let him be to you ...,' Christ was giving them not only the *power* of the Keys, but directing them to *use* the Keys ... binding sin, excommunicating a person, and closing the door to heaven are all essentially the same thing. This becomes clear from the words that follow immediately in verse 18: 'Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.' To whom were these words addressed? To all Christians, to the Christian congregation. And if the opponents say, 'Christ here gave the congregation of Christians not the *authority* to administer the Keys but only the *power* of the Keys,' we answer, 'In Matthew 16:19 Christ was not limiting the ministry of the Keys to any one person, not even to Peter. Wherever Christ refers to this ministry, his words are the same. If on one occasion his words seem to give this ministry just to one person, we understand these words in the light of what Christ said elsewhere. The Keys belong to the entire congregation of all Christians and to each member of that group. To them belongs not only the *power* of the Keys, but also the *authority to use* them.' "

What Luther says here with references to the Ministry of the Keys applies naturally also to the other named priestly activities. Every Christian not only has these rights, but he is to make use of them. The Christian's exercise of his rights certainly has limitations. He will be guided by the apostle's command to do things in an orderly way, guided by love for his brother and sister (see Thesis 4).

Here is a truth that needs to be emphasized in our day, that individual Christians are to exercise their priesthood (as long as they do not violate good order in the church). Unfortunately one doesn't see much of this among us Lutherans. Congregations call someone to be their pastor, others to teach their children, still others to serve as officers of their congregation. But what about the rest of the membership? They're informed of their financial responsibilities and reminded that they're expected to attend worship services, to receive the Lord's Supper regularly, and to live a godly life. But the real priestly activity to which Luther referred is usually left up to the called workers. Most often individual Christians as such do not share in preaching and teaching God's word, in baptizing and using the Keys, in the priestly work of praying and offering sacrifice, in striving to preserve sound doctrine, and in showing concern for the lives their fellow Christians are leading. It's almost as though the congregation has hitched its pastor to the congregational wagon, after which the members climb aboard and allow themselves to be pulled along by the pastor.

That surely was not Christ's plan for his church. According to God's order, the pastor exercises those functions of the priesthood publicly which could not be performed by larger numbers of

people without causing disorder and confusion. To the extent that good order allows, however, every Christian - - by virtue of the fact that he is a priest - - is through his faith entrusted with the sacred obligation to invest the particular gifts God has given him in the welfare of the congregation and of the entire Christian church. It would be in accord with Christ's plan if a Christian who has the necessary gifts would volunteer to proclaim the gospel on a street corner in some metropolitan area, or to native Americans, or to others who have no church home. By doing so he is not meddling in somebody else's business, but simply exercising his own priesthood. What growth in Christian understanding and Christian commitment we would notice in our congregations if the pastor were to enlist any members to help in his work - - as is the practice in sectarian churches.

Above all, God's people dare not forget the most prominent activity of priests: offering sacrifice. In Romans 12 Paul explains what that involves: offering our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, not conforming to the pattern of this world, but being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

St. Peter describes this priestly activity as "offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pe 2:5). Viewed from one perspective, these offerings consist, as Luther puts it, of "daily killing the sacrificial calf" (our corrupt nature with its rebellious desires), instead of following the unbelieving world in its godless lifestyle.

From another viewpoint, offering our bodies as spiritual sacrifices means that, in new and holy devotion, we place our gifts and abilities, all that we are and have, even family, into Christ's service, building his church on earth. Sacrifices of this type are lacking today, especially in the Lutheran church. Our lay members are not sufficiently involved actively in Christ's work. On the one hand, worldly-mindedness has so infected the Christian community that it's often difficult to tell a Christian from the unbelieving world. The dominant trait of the unbelieving world - - wanting to get rich - - has brainwashed our Christians into thinking that there's nothing wrong with that desire. And yet the Scripture warns, "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction" (1 Ti 6:9). Those who are covetous will not inherit the kingdom of God. To hanker after what this world has to offer is not crucifying your corrupt nature. It's not "killing the sacrificial calf," but feeding it and helping it grow. And that well-fed calf will finally stifle faith and the spiritual priesthood in our heart. Our offerings for God's work are so pitifully small, the leftovers of our income. In no other church are the offerings for one's congregation, for missions, and for the Lord's work in general as meager as in the Lutheran church. True priestly sacrificing places into the Lord's service not just what we can spare, but the first and the best of everything God has given us, including our very selves. A special assignment God has given our pastors is to instruct Christians in how to bring true offerings, how to carry out this phase of the priesthood.

## Thesis 2

**The public priesthood is not, as the pope teaches, a teaching, ruling and sacrificing ministry which God has established over Christian people, but rather the joint exercising of each individual's own priesthood.**

The first half of this thesis describes the papacy's doctrine of what constitutes public ministry in the church. According to Rome's teaching, public ministry is a teaching-ruling-sacrificing office which Christ has established in and over his church. It does not flow from the universal priesthood of every believer - - something which the papacy specifically disavows - - but it stands independently *alongside, outside of, and over* all spiritual priests. Rome consistently speaks of teaching-ruling-sacrificing authority which Christ has given to a specific class of ordained spiritual leaders, an authority over the laity. This is the very essence of the Roman church. A person may enter this priesthood only by being installed into it by ordination, by being given this office by a higher authority. The pope does not recognize as a true priest someone who has simply been chosen by a congregation to serve them with word and sacrament. The congregation has neither a ministry to entrust to a man they choose, nor the authority to designate someone to exercise that ministry. Instead, the priesthood is an ecclesiastical ministry established by Christ himself. Whoever cannot trace his position in the church back to a bishop, who in turn has himself received his office, over many generations, from one of the apostles and hence from Christ himself, does not have a valid ministry in the church.

"The priesthood does not belong to the whole body of believers, but only to certain *designated* men, who through the authorized imposition of hands and the liturgical ceremonies of the holy church have been installed and dedicated to God, ordained to a personal and holy ministry. That is why in the Old Testament, and even more so in the New, no one could take upon himself this ministry except one who was formally called and installed in it. The man ordained as a priest has been divinely ordained to interpret God's ways to men, and to mediate between God and man" (The Roman Catechism II: 333). "Without priestly ordination no one may administer the other sacraments" (318). "Only the bishop may ordain a man into the priesthood; he himself has been ordained by three bishops" (335 f). "All believers, who have been cleansed by the holy water of baptism, are indeed called priests, but their priesthood is *only an inner one*. They can offer sacrifices on the altar of their hearts, sacrifices of good and pious actions, but *the outward priesthood* is a special, holy ministry instituted by Christ. There are five levels or ranks of priesthood:

- parish priests
- bishops
- archbishops
- patriarchs
- the Roman pope

*Bishops* have been placed over the *priests* and the laity as shepherds. *Archbishops* exercise authority over a number of bishops. *Patriarchs* are the early and preeminent church fathers. The *pope* is the father and patriarch of the entire world, who sits on the throne of Peter, prince of the apostles. To him belongs the highest degree of honor, as well as the ultimate jurisdiction, not as a result of synodical resolution or human decree, but from God himself. As the head of the church, he is the father and prince of all believers and bishops and all other officials, because he is the successor of Peter, and the true representative of the Lord Jesus Christ (434 f). The priest receives his authority not from the congregation and its election, but through his ordination as priest. "This authority is also known as the spiritual character, which is indelibly impressed upon his soul" (338 f).

Luther denies and condemns this entire papal doctrine in all of his writings from 1520 on, down to his very last one, *The Papacy at Rome, Instituted by the Devil*. He calls it a satanic work. In *The Freedom of the Christian* he teaches that because of God the Christian is a free lord over all things and is subject to no one. Again and again Luther emphasizes, "You have only one Master, and you are all brothers." That word of Christ applies not only to the apostles and to the public servants of the church, but to all Christians in general. Christ has prescribed and instituted no office for his church which has authority over Christians, like the authority which the pope claims. The only servants of the church whom Christ authorized were the apostles, but in the church even they had no authority over the conscience of a Christian. They were merely what Paul calls himself - - servants of Christ, ambassadors for Christ, stewards of the mysteries of God - - not lords over anybody's faith (2 Co 1:24; 4:1; 5:20).

And yet there is in the church a public office which Christ has instituted and ordained, "the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments," as Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession calls it. As we have already noted, this is the ministry which the Lord has implanted when he brought them to faith and which he has commanded them to carry out. What the Lord said to Peter (Mt 16:19), and what he commanded in John 21:23, Mark 16:15 f, and Matthew 28:19, he says to all Christians. *In its content* the public ministry is not different from the priesthood of every individual believer. It differs from the priesthood of the individual Christian only *in form* - -or, as Luther says, in its use. In other words, the public ministry is nothing else than *the joint exercise of the priesthood which, according to proper divine order, belongs to every Christian*. The Lord has not instituted a priesthood made up only of selected individuals, but a whole community of spiritual priests, the entire church of believers.

The Lord calls Christians to carry out the activities of their priesthood not only as individuals, but also jointly. The church is Christ's spiritual body, of which individual Christians are members - - a spiritual priesthood, that is, a communion of priests, to whom as such the command given to all individual Christians applies: "Declare the praises of God!" In good order the Christian church carries out this command through those whom God has specially equipped for this work. So that the body of Christ may be built up, the ascended Lord himself

has given his church special gifts, to administer publicly those priestly prerogatives and to exercise that priestly authority which he gave to each individual Christian (Ep 4; 1 Co 12).

Right here, along with the command to follow good order in the church, we have the scriptural basis for administering the public ministry of the church through individual, specially-equipped members of the church. This is clearly the will of God. It's equally clear that the work carried out by the public servants of the church is nothing else that what the spiritual priesthood has been given to do. Church officials as such carry out nothing more than their own spiritual priesthood, as well as that of every other member the congregation, in whose name they function. Luther is unwilling to grant any public servant of the church the right, by virtue of his office, to appoint priests. That title properly belongs to only to Christians as such. Luther designates those who administer this priesthood publicly on behalf of a group of Christians "servants, stewards, elders or bishops." He writes, "All this corroborates the truth that those who lead the congregation in word and sacrament dare not and should not be called 'priest.' The fact that they have been called 'priests' can be traced either to pagan custom, or it's a remnant from the law of the ancient Hebrews, and since then it has resulted in great harm to the church. According to the scripture, it would be preferable to designate them servants, deacons, overseers or stewards; because of their age they were often referred to as elders, presbyteri" (*Saemmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis Edition X: 1590).

Elsewhere Luther writes, "We don't want this priesthood, which is part of our Christian birthright and heritage, taken from us, obstructed, or clouded. Instead, we want it publicized, proclaimed, and praised, so that its real beauty may shine like the sun. We want it to be an irritant to the devil and his dupes, so that his fake ordination and chrism may be exposed and reek like satanic filth. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit made sure that the title 'priest' was not given to any apostle or church official, but only to the baptized child of God. In his baptism he receives the priesthood as his birthright, his heritage. None of us in baptism was reborn as an apostle, a preacher, a teacher, or a pastor, but all of us became priests. Later on such priests are called and chosen to serve in public offices, which they exercise *on behalf of the rest of us*" (XIX: 1260).

Essentially the public ministry is nothing else than the joint exercise, in orderly fashion, of the priesthood given to every individual believer. Luther gives us an exquisite summary of this truth when he writes, "God be praised, that in our churches we can offer Christians a true Christian mass (a worship service with Holy Communion), just as Christ ordained and instituted it .... the pastor or bishop or servant of the word who steps before the altar has been properly and publicly called, but even before that *in his baptism he has been consecrated, anointed, and reborn to be a priest of Christ*, without any artificial anointing. At the celebration of the Lord's Supper, he chants Christ's words of institution publicly and plainly, takes bread and wine, gives thanks, and distributes them to the communicants together with Christ's words, "This is my body, this is my blood; do this in remembrance of me.' And we who wish to receive the sacrament kneel alongside him and around him - - husband and wife, young and old, master

and servant, parents and children, as God has brought us all together - *-but all of us true, holy priests along with the celebrant, priests who have been sanctified by Christ's blood and anointed and consecrated by the Holy Spirit in baptism. We are there in all of the priestly honor and splendor which is our birthright and heritage, as Revelation 4:4 pictures it, with crowns of gold on our heads and harps in our hands. And we permit our pastor to speak Christ's words of institution not for himself, on his own authority, but as the mouth of all of us. From our heart and in faith we speak, together with him, to the Lamb of God, who is for us and with us and who feeds us with his body and blood. This is our mass, the true mass, which cannot fail to bless us"* (XIX: 1279 f).

The public ministry, then, is nothing else than this: one person, in the name of all, does publicly what all the others have the right and the authority to do. Listen again to Luther, "Talk with the papistic priests, and they will claim their priesthood involves a priestly authority different from that of the spiritual priesthood of every believer. If their priesthood has a different authority, then it is not a Christian priesthood. If their priesthood has the *same authority* which has just been described, then it *cannot* be a *special* priesthood. To summarize:

- either they have no priesthood which is different from the one common to all Christians,
- or the priesthood which they have must be Satan's priesthood.

Any good fruit which their ministry produces is not proof that there is indeed a different priesthood, but only evidence of one and the same priesthood" (X: 1589).

### Thesis 3

**Just as Christ did not give the priesthood only to "certain special persons" in the church, but to all Christians as their inalienable birthright and heritage, so both the private and the joint exercise of the priesthood are God's will and command, as well as the Spirit's working.**

The papacy teaches that the public ministry was given "to certain special persons" by direct divine decree and transmission. Luther taught, on the other hand, that all the offices which public servants of the church administer were originally given to all Christians as part of their baptismal birthright. The public exercise of those offices, however, is not a part of each Christian's heritage, since other Christians have the same authority. Luther comments: "Treasure your baptism, and you will weaken and destroy that awful abomination (that the public ministry was given to 'certain special persons'). Christianity does not manufacture pastors by ordaining them; anointing doesn't make us pastors ... we don't want manufactured priests; we want to be known as priests who have received their priesthood as part of their birthright. Our Father is the true pastor and high priest, as is written in Psalm 110: 'the LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.'" He gave proof of that when he offered himself on the cross. That priest or bishop now has a bride, a priestess, according to John 3:29: 'The bride belongs to the bridegroom.' *Through holy baptism we have been born to this bridegroom and his bride, and our*

birthright makes us priests in the Christian church, *sanctified by his blood and consecrated by the Holy Spirit*" (XIX: 1258).

Our Lord has commanded us not to let our priesthood be inactive, but to exercise it privately and publicly. The Scripture urges us, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another" (Cl 3:16). It's God's will that we be active with his word. That's why he has given us his promise, "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Mt 18:20). The Lord wants us to obey his command, and to trust his promise. He has told us, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." That applies to all Christians as individuals, as well as to the church as a group of Christians. *This is the formal institution* not only of one's *private* ministry as a Christian, but also of the *public* ministry. In the entire Bible there is not another word formally instituting the public ministry.

There is, however, something more to the New Testament concept of this institution than the mere command, "Go and preach!" Luther comments: "Christ earned for us, at fearful cost, the privilege of possessing word and sacrament. There is no further evangelical institution which our Savior, in addition to his sacrificial death, would have had to provide for us. On the cross he had to buy his church at a price; we have the gospel at the cost of his blood. He paid his life to purchase for us the holy ministry (private and public), the speaking and proclaiming of the truth of his grace, celebrating baptism and the Lord's Supper.

He made that sacrifice in order that the word of his grace could be at work in all the world, in private and in public. To make that happen, he gave the clear command, "Go, preach, baptize, celebrate my supper!" - - not, however, as an order which demands obedience. *Christ did not die to earn a command for us* - - his cross destroys and does away with every command - - but as an expression of his determined will of grace, which seeks to rescue us and to make us his forever. It's not up to any Christian or group of Christians to choose whether or not to be active privately or jointly with God's word, whether to establish the ministry of the word in their midst, or not. God has made it clear that the private and public administration of word and sacrament is his holy will for our eternal deliverance from sin. It will not be necessary to adduce further quotes from Luther to prove this.

Not only is the exercise of our personal and joint ministry of the word clearly God's will and command, but *the Holy Spirit accomplishes this* in and through us Christians. Through faith we have become, primarily, recipients of God's grace, hearers of the word, like Mary, who sat at Jesus' feet. But we have also become doers of the word, thus carrying out our priesthood. Luther says, "No one can deny that every Christian possesses God's word and has been taught and anointed by God to be a priest, just as Christ says, 'They will all be taught by God' (Jn 6:45). 'Your God has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy' (Ps 45:7). These 'companions' are our fellow Christians, Christ's brothers, who have been consecrated to the priesthood along with him, just as Peter emphasizes: 'You are a royal priesthood, to declare the praises of him who called you' (1 Pe 2:9). If it's true that Christians possess God's word and

have been anointed by him, then it follows that they are under obligation to confess, teach, and spread the word. St. Paul makes that clear: 'With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak' (2 Co 4:13), as does the psalmist, 'I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you' (Ps 51:13). These words make it clear that a Christian not only has the right and the authority to teach the word of God, but that he is under obligation to do so, at the cost of losing his own forgiveness and life, and in their place, incurring the fierce displeasure of God" (X: 1544).

As surely as we believe, so surely must we speak. In the confidence which the Holy Spirit has taught us, we will preach and teach that same word. Our Lord has said, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mt 12:34). When the Pharisees and religious leaders wanted to silence the children who were singing their hosannas, the Lord replied, "Have you never read, 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'? I tell you, *if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.*"

In his preface to the epistle to the Romans, Luther comments, "Faith is a powerful, active, productive thing. It is constantly at work, and cannot stop producing results." That's a classic remark. The truth that the Lord has revealed to us - - that he bore our sin, freed us from Satan's control, delivered us through faith from a world under his curse, adopted us as his children and brothers and sisters, chosen us as his bride, and seated us next to him on his throne - - that is so unspeakably magnificent that if we were to remain silent about this, the stones themselves - - dead creatures of God - - would have to speak out to our shame.

We Christians are Christ's witnesses, for through faith the Holy Spirit has made us to be just that. Peter said, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Ac 4:20). The priestly spirit in our hearts produces priestly works: praying, offering sacrifices, proclaiming, and testifying to Jesus Christ privately and publicly. Where a group of Christians has gathered around the word, there the Holy Spirit will be active. He tightens the bond of their fellowship in Jesus Christ, since they're all members of his body, with the same needs, the same goals, and the same compulsion to testify to the good news. He moves them to allow the word to dwell richly among them, and to find appropriate ways to proclaim the word publicly in their midst. If the members of a congregation fail to do this, their faith will die.

But the Spirit moves not only the congregation as such to teach God's word and to testify to the unbelieving world, but he gives his church special gifts to edify the Body of Christ. According to 1 Corinthians 12, the Christian congregation is the spiritual body of Christ, of which each of us is an individual member, each endowed by God with his own specific gift, for a specific role. We Christians are all spiritual priests, but all are endowed with different gifts. Just as in nature the Creator created no two things exactly alike, just as in the human body no two members are identical, so it is in the spiritual body. In a Christian congregation, no two members are completely alike, each has his own special gift, given by God to be invested in the welfare of the entire body of Christians.

In 1 Corinthians 12:28 f and Ephesians 4, St. Paul makes special mention of gifts which God distributes to enable a Christian, with proper training, to serve God as a teacher or leader of some segment of God's flock, "He *gave* some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers." And he gave those gifts "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up." The church receives these gifts and puts them into use where they can serve the common good. If we were to despise the particular gifts God has given, if each were to insist he can do everything, including that for which God has not specifically equipped him, the church would be thrown into disorder. And so, in accord with Christ's general command and under the gracious working of the Holy Spirit, the church appoints public servants of word and sacrament - - self-evidently in a way that is both honorable and orderly. In this way both the public as well as the private ministry of word and sacrament have been instituted by God himself.

Luther says, "I hope that Christians recognize that the spiritual priesthood has been established by God himself, not with gold or silver, but with the precious blood and bitter death of his son, our Lord Jesus Christ. I'm not referring to the present spiritual arrangement found in cloisters and monastic orders, but to the arrangement for the office of the public ministry of word and sacrament - - specifically the ministry of the pastor, teacher, preacher, lector, chaplain - - positions which the Scripture esteems and praises highly (X: 422). For these, however, God established no legal instruction or ordination in the Roman sense of that term. In his tract *Of the Abuse of the Mass* Luther said, "Paul wrote to his pupil Titus, 'The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.' Whoever believes that here *the Spirit of Christ* spoke through Paul and gave these instructions will recognize that it is God's institution and arrangement to have one or more bishops in every city" (XIX: 1093). It is also clear that Paul made no distinction between an elder and a bishop, since he instructed Titus to appoint elders in every city.

This statement of Luther has been quoted as proof that he taught that the pastorate is divinely ordered. To say that, however, is to misunderstand what Luther said. His words must be understood in the light of the contrast he was expressing. He directed his words against the papistic teaching that God made a distinction between the office of a bishop and that of a parish pastor, that bishops have been given authority over an entire circuit of cities, or over an entire geographical district. Against that Luther argued, "According to the Bible, bishop and pastor are one and the same. It is God's will that each city have at least one bishop or pastor, perhaps several." Luther spoke in concrete terms. He clearly meant to say that wherever a group of Christians has been gathered around the word, it is God's will and order that the ministry of word and sacrament be instituted publicly and properly, on behalf of the congregation. Elsewhere Luther expressly denied that an apostle, even Paul or Peter, had the right to institute or prescribe anything that goes beyond what the gospel and God's word have said. It is the pope's teaching, not Luther's, that the apostles had the right, without any specific command of Christ, to extend their own authority so as to be able to establish regulations for workers in congregations. It's true that Paul appointed bishops or elders in the congregations he had

established (Ac 14:23), but he was not acting as a supervisor, or as an apostle with pope's or bishop's authority. Paul's appointments were simply acts of love, in order to meet a need. The apostles used whatever form of ministry God provided. In Crete, Paul appointed bishops; in Corinth he allowed existing prophets to minister.

The public ministry is the means the Lord Jesus uses to build his church and to lead it to spiritual maturity (Ep 4). Whoever rejects this divine arrangement destroys his soul's salvation. Luther remarked, "Many come right out and ask: "Why do we need pastor and preachers any more? We can read the word of God for ourselves at home' " - - and then return home and neglect the reading of the word. Or if they do read it for themselves, it isn't as fruitful and powerful as it is when preached publicly by the pastor whom God has called and placed into his ministry of preaching" (XIII: 1816). Luther added, "It should be noted that although God spoke to Paul directly from heaven he has not chosen to replace the ministry of preaching with anything else. Instead he directs us to the pastor and the pulpit; there we are to hear and learn what we need to know. God has made it clear that we are to hear the gospel from those who preach it. Here is where we are to find him, and nowhere else" (XII 25 f).

#### Thesis 4

**If the priesthood is to be exercised jointly by chosen individuals, the approval of the respective community of priests (a proper call) is required.**

This is the clear teaching of our church in Article 14 of the Augsburg Confession, "that no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he be regularly called." This is required by God's word and by the law (1 Co 14:40), and is based on the principle that *all believers have equal rights and share equal responsibility*. Luther energetically insisted that all offices which exercise the public ministry belong to all Christians - - not only with regard to the right to conduct such ministry, but also with regard to the manner in which it's conducted. He wrote: "We speak of the ministry as a right and authority which belongs to all Christians, a right which we have demonstrated and defended. It would therefore be improper for a person to put himself forward and to claim for himself a right which belongs to all of us. The rights of the body of Christians, however, demand that they be allowed to select the person(s) whom they wish to exercise the ministry in the name of and in the place of others who themselves possess that right. This is to prevent horrible disorder from arising among the people of God and to keep the church, in which all things are to be conducted in a fitting and orderly way, from becoming a Babylon. In a congregation of spiritual priests, all of whom possess the right of ministry, no one should presume to exercise ministry publicly without the approval and the call of the entire congregation. An exception would be an emergency, in which any Christian may choose to exercise his ministry" (XIX: 1589).

In its content, the public ministry is identical to the spiritual priesthood; it does what the other does. It differs from the spiritual priesthood, however, in its form, in the way it's put to use.

The public ministry is the spiritual priesthood exercised in the name of other Christians, who have the same God-given authority and the same divine command.

God's stipulation that the person in the congregation who steps forward to teach, to baptize, and to administer the sacrament may do so only with the approval of the others - - and not without it - - presupposes that all share the same authority and the same assignment. If we agree that it is clearly God's will that his word and sacrament be administered publicly, that is, as a joint activity of the body of Christians, and that the person called to this public ministry must in every respect be qualified, then we have Luther's doctrine of the public ministry in its entirety - - and that is scriptural doctrine. Luther also emphasized that the call into the holy ministry need not always involve a formal vote, as long as the person called exercises his office with the approval of all. For Luther, ordination was a fine outward custom, for the sake of good order. He emphasized that Apollos, Stephen, and Philip preached Christ merely "from intense inner love" (X: 1593). He emphasized, on the other hand, that even an apostle could do or prescribe nothing without the consent of the congregation. When the apostle Paul said to Timothy or Titus, "I give you this instruction ...," this is not to be understood as an order coming from a higher spiritual authority, but an earnest appeal of faith and of love, whose intensity is a gift of God to every believer. Paul spoke to those two young pastors in this way not as their spiritual superior, but as their brother in Christ. They recognized that under the Fourth Commandment they were spiritual sons of his, and in their ministry they willingly submitted to his guidance.

#### Thesis 5

**There are no divine stipulations regulating the outward form of the private and public exercise of one's priesthood, beyond the general prescription that it be decent and orderly. The Christian's priesthood itself will create these forms, according to the circumstances and the spirit of the congregation.**

The Scripture prescribes the characteristics of those persons who exercise the public ministry (1 Ti 3; Ti 1, et al). All of these instructions are in the nature of things generally accepted. No unbeliever, for example, should be permitted to preach God's Word, either privately or publicly.

"What right have you to recite my laws  
or take my covenant on your lips?  
You hate my instruction  
and cast my words behind you" (Ps 50:16 f)

That would be the worst sort of hypocrisy. In Romans 2:20-24 Paul says the same thing. When a called servant of the word leads a scandalous life, God's name and his gospel are disgraced. The scripture throughout states the requirement therefore, that those who, on behalf of the church, proclaim the word must be blameless in their personal conduct, and to such a degree that in their lives they serve as role models.

God's *second* requirement for public servants of the word is that they possess the ability and aptitude to carry out the functions of the public ministry. No one by nature possesses this competence, and not every Christian can be called into this ministry. The public servant of the word must be capable of learning. He must have a proper understanding of the gospel, and must bring a wealth of understanding into his ministry. He must also be able to silence those who oppose his message, and to stand up resolutely against public error and false doctrine. For these reasons we cannot allow any and every Christian to enter the public ministry. This is why we operate training schools, at which over a period of years and with considerable care and solicitude, God-fearing young Christians are helped to attain to the competence God requires for public ministry.

It's not that the public ministry requires only Christians who are absolutely perfect in their life and their teaching. Nobody is perfect, and as a result every congregation must, in Christian love, bear with weaknesses and mistakes in the doctrine and life of their pastors and teachers. St. Paul asks, "Who is equal to such a task?" "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." We dare not point out to a public servant of the word every sinful trait of his, or every weakness, or every falsehood or incorrect language he has spoken from the pulpit. Luther reminds us that our Christian life - - and this applies to pastor, too - - is never complete; it's a work in progress. Again and again we acknowledge our mistakes in life and in teaching, we repent of them and we strive for perfection.

A *third* requirement for the pastor is that he learn not to meddle in someone else's affairs. The fact that a man has been called to preach the word in a certain congregation does not give him the right to get involved in the ministry of the word or in the administration of another congregation without its consent and that of its pastor. This is simply a matter of propriety.

St. Paul may seem to be introducing an unusual regulation when he withholds the public ministry of the word from women. But, again, this requirement is basically nothing else than a matter of propriety, for it rests on the divine order that woman is to be subject to man. Woman is not to be man's instructor, for that would subvert the Lord's order: "He will rule over you" (Ge 3:16). Luther added this comment: "When Paul forbade this, he was not simply expressing his personal opinion, but he appealed to the law, which says women are to be subject" (XIX: 1090). Luther also called attention to the fact that the daughters of the deacon Philip proclaimed the word publicly, as did Moses' sister Miriam, the prophetess Huldah, Deborah, and Mary. The apostle Paul himself instructed women, when praying or *prophesying*, to do so with heads covered, and adds that if there are no men, or if the men present are unqualified to preach, women are not only permitted to preach, but must do so (XVI: 2280; XX: 1665).

*Beyond that*, the scripture gives no instructions about what constitutes propriety. It prescribes no specific forms the public ministry must take. The Scripture is thereby saying that every form of ministry that is conducted in the name of the congregation is ordained by God. No particular form of the ministry, however - - whether it be that of the parish pastor, teacher, professor,

circuit pastor or synod president - - can claim a *specific* divine institution which elevates it over other forms.

Two things belong to the essence of the public ministry. The first is that it proclaims God's word. The second is that it does this in the name of the church. Whichever specific form of ministry embodies these two truths is *divinely instituted*, but none is more divine than any other. We say this because of the notion, widespread in this country, that only the specific form of the public ministry which Luther designated as the pastoral office is divinely instituted, while all other forms of public ministry are only *human* institutions.

It was noted earlier that in his *Sermon on the Duty of Sending Children to School* Luther listed the following as specific forms of public ministry: that of a pastor, teacher, preacher, lector, and chaplain. He claimed that all of them have been divinely instituted, and designated all of them as *spiritual ministry*. Paul designated them all as God's stewards and servants, bishops, teachers, prophets, ambassadors - - to reconcile a world of sinners to God. The prophet Obadiah called them "deliverers" (21). Whether the public ministry is conducted in the name of a local congregation, or in the name of a group of congregations which have joined hands to form a synod, makes no difference with respect to the divine institution of that ministry. Every public ministry of the church which proclaims God's word and administers the sacraments is of *divine* origin and institution, regardless of what it's called. The name is not important. When Luther referred to the pastoral ministry as instituted by God, he was referring not to the *form* of that ministry, but to its *essence*. He stated explicitly: "If a man has the call to preach, Paul calls him 'pastor,' 'bishop,' 'pope'" (XIX: 1283; cf X: 1599). Luther called the office of visiting elder "God's command" (XVII: 1155). In *The Wittenberg Reformation* (1545) Luther stated expressly that for him the ministerial office was not limited to the pastoral ministry, but *included every form of public proclamation of the word*. He consistently equated the terms 'ministerial office' and '*ministerium evangelii*' " (XVII: 1151).

God did not establish special regulations governing joint pastorates - - whether one man serves as the head pastor and another as his assistant, or whether several called pastors share the duties of preaching, baptizing, administering the sacrament, and the care of souls. Christian congregations determine these matters on the basis of individual need, using the wisdom the Spirit of God supplies. They humbly search the scriptures for guidance and pray for illumination and direction from above. The forms which public ministry customarily takes are external and human in nature. The ministry itself - - proclaiming God's word and administering the sacraments, whether done *privately* by every Christian, or *jointly* by every group of Christians in good order - - that is not of human origin, but is divinely instituted.

It is nowhere stated that only he can be a pastor for whom this is a lifelong office, nor on the other hand that a man who served for a time as a pastor remains a pastor even when he leaves the ministry. Luther made it very clear that a man who gives up the public ministry is once again a layman. Faithfulness to our call requires that we who are engaged in public ministry do

not run away from our call, unless an emergency demands it. Especially at this time circumstances require every public servant of the word to serve under his call as long as he is able to fulfill the duties of his ministry. Even a temporary ministry is a divinely-instituted ministry, provided it is based on a valid call of the church. When Walther condemned temporary calls, he had in mind the sort of professional contract in which two business partners arbitrarily determine in advance how long the arrangement is to last.

One final word of Luther's regarding the church's freedom to choose its forms of ministry. On one occasion Luther referred to the unusual form the public ministry assumed in the congregation in ancient Corinth. God had given that congregation a number of prophets, who during the worship service would take turns proclaiming the word. "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation" (1 Co 14:26).

Luther commented, "Although this way of conducting the worship service has disappeared, yet it was a *proper and appropriate way to instruct the church*. Today one might chant, another read something in an unknown tongue, another might translate into German, still another illustrate with examples, as St. James (Ac 15) and St. Paul (Ac 13) did. I suppose it's possible that this form of worship might return, and pulpits be removed from our churches, but I would advise against it. Satan would surely want to get involved and foment unholy competition among the speakers. It's better that we keep our pulpits ... St. Paul wasn't as much concerned about the particular form the ministry assumes as he was that all be done in a fitting and orderly way. Since our way of preaching is more orderly than that which St. Paul described, we ought to retain it. That ancient order of worship may have worked well at the time of the apostles, when there were a number of prophets, but it would be a mistake to attempt to reintroduce it today" (XX: 1675).

Luther couldn't have made it more clear that he considered the form of the public ministry instituted by Christ which we call the pastoral office to be a form of ministry which has developed throughout history. As far as we know, the congregation in Corinth had neither bishop nor pastor, but a number of "resident" prophets, who carried out the functions of the ministry, speaking in turn in the worship service. St. Paul did not insist that they abandon this antiphonal preaching as something ungodly, but he did insist that everything in the worship service be done in a fitting and orderly way.

Our ministry to our people today has assumed the form of the pastoral office and, with Luther, we consider this form to be more "fitting and orderly." If, however, anybody were to try to impose this form upon us as a divine command, we would have to abolish what we have and introduce the Corinthian liturgy, or some other one - - provided God would give us the requisite gifts - - in order that we might not become slaves of men, and so that we retained the freedom of the gospel.

The great danger facing the Lutheran church today is its externalization - - clinging to the outer human shell, while at the same time losing the precious kernel, the gospel which Luther taught so clearly and purely.

May God give us his Holy Spirit, so that we may learn to recognize and to appreciate the precious gospel as our one great treasure. Then questions about church forms, including the forms of the public ministry, will answer themselves.

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*Note to the Reader*

This message was originally spoken, not printed and read. The audience heard it in the German language. Professor August Pieper (1857-1946) of the (Wisconsin) Lutheran Seminary at Wauwatosa presented it in person. The occasion was the convention of the Wisconsin Synod's Nebraska District. The place was St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Norfolk.

Of special interest is the over-arching theme of that convention: the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 Theses igniting the Reformation (1517). In the introduction of this address, the author states, "I would like to present the treasure of the Reformation according to the concept which the greatest man of the Lutheran church in this country, Dr. Walther, introduced to identify the essence of Lutheranism: the priesthood of all believers."

This translation of *Luthers Lehre vom christlichen Priestertum* comes from Professor John Jeske.